

THE DAUNTLESS DON: HOW C. S. LEWIS BECAME A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL, 1938-1944

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Abstract

The paper argues that part of C. S. Lewis's perennial success owes to his persona as a Public Intellectual. It is therefore useful and instructive to trace the steps in the evolution that led him from literary historian and Oxford professor to Public Intellectual, a process that took place between 1938 and 1944 during the dire days of World War II.

Keywords: *C. S. Lewis, the Inklings, World War II, Public Intellectual, Mere Christianity, The Abolition of Man, the BBC, relativism/emotivism, the Age of Disenchantment and Anxiety*

INTRODUCTION

Though C. S. Lewis had been teaching at Magdalen College, Oxford, since 1925, in 1938 he was almost totally unknown outside of Oxford, and even there he was viewed primarily as an erudite specialist in obscure medieval poetry. Then in less than a decade and mostly during a horrendous world war, Lewis became nationally renowned, a Public Intellectual. His was a calming voice amidst chaos and death while establishing him as a kind of cultural “brand.” Lewis was called upon to give lectures and opinions not only on esoteric literary matters, but on pacifism, the value of learning in war-time, British “Blimpophobia,” space exploration, George Orwell, Christmas, and “Is History Bunk?” In the end, Lewis the Public Intellectual proved to be no mere wartime flash in the pan. Following

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the war, his sphere of influence spread internationally, achieving the ultimate American accolade when he made the cover of *Time Magazine* in September of 1947.

However, discussion of Lewis as a Public Intellectual has been slow in coming. His achievements as a scholar, creator of fantasy worlds, and Christian writer, of course, were widely recognized. But, following his death when he became the legitimate target of doctoral dissertations, writers of learned tomes, and the unqualified devotion of an ever burgeoning fandom, the usual approaches to Lewis tended to focus on various compartments of his work. This was illustrated at the outset by Jocelyn Gibb's 1965 *Light on C. S. Lewis* (1965), which was composed entirely of chapters by people who knew him as the Christian apologist, the medieval scholar, the English tutor at Magdalen College, Oxford, the imaginative writer, the poet, and of his impact on America respectively (Bray and Gray, 2012).

Possibly the first writer to consider C. S. Lewis as a "Public Intellectual" was Richard John Neuhaus, whose extended discussion of "C. S. Lewis in the Public Square" appeared in the Lewis bicentennial year of 1998 (Neuhaus, 1998). Subsequently, other treatments addressed the issue: Bruce L. Edwards, "The Christian Intellectual in the Public Square: C. S. Lewis's Enduring American Reception" (Edwards, 2007); Samuel Joeckel, *The C. S. Lewis Phenomenon. Christianity and the Public Sphere* (Joeckel, 2012); and Stephanie L. Derrick, *The Fame of C. S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* (Derrick, 2018). Unlike the other three writers here, Neuhaus was not a Lewis scholar, something he implied might not even be a thing. Secondly, his primary focus is the Public Square, which meant largely politics, something that Lewis had an aversion to. Indeed, Neuhaus recognizes that Lewis was "determinedly apolitical" whose public voice on behalf of "reason, myth, splendor, and virtue" only hoped to indirectly impact political matters.

Edwards, Joeckel, and Derrick, on the other hand, are indeed Lewis scholars. Edwards' piece concentrated on Lewis's impact on the United States, that is, on the post-1945 era when Lewis was already a Public Intellectual. However, he was more concerned with Lewis's impact on the United States, where Lewis's reputation and influence rapidly eclipsed that which he had in the UK.

Joeckel's study was much more ambitious, aiming at providing what he calls "a meta-analysis" of the Lewis phenomenon, broadly conceived, rather than a chronological treatment. In the end, Joeckel is more concerned with trying to demythologize Lewis as a public manifestation and less concerned with exactly how Lewis emerged as a Public Intellectual. Joeckel's book was part of a promising trend in US Lewis studies that moved beyond the fanboi, hero-worshipping approach.

Lastly, Derrick tackled the problem only indirectly. Her book was notable because she does not shrink from criticizing Lewis, his ideas, his "personae," and those of his admirers basking in hagiography. On the other hand, she was not particularly concerned with the story of Lewis's pre-1945 evolution into a Public Intellectual. Her theme of "Lewis as Controversialist" certainly deals with his Public Intellectual persona, but is more noteworthy on Lewis's personality (the Ulster contrarian); his relationships with his Oxbridge peers in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s; his "popular" reception in the UK and the US; and how his success was related to "the mechanisms of mass culture" in America and in Britain.

So why this paper? The present discussion differs from most previous studies in that its focus is specifically on the development of the Lewis brand between 1938 and 1944, the emergence of Lewis as a Public Intellectual. It is also written more for what is hoped to be a wider general audience. By viewing Lewis through the prism of Public Intellectual, such a hypothetical general audience will be able to better understand how and why Lewis was such a success as a writer and apologist.

Who was C. S. Lewis? His personal development had been rather unorthodox in that, unlike a lot of his colleagues, he did not start out at Oxford as an unsophisticated, Christianity-professing student, who gradually lost his faith as his educational attainments grew, finally transitioning into a professor whose principal vocation was to undermine the religious faith of his students. Indeed, it was the other way round: Lewis had long before renounced Christianity. Even before coming up to Oxford, he wrote to a friend:

I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best. All religions, that is, all mythologies to give them their proper names are merely man's own invention—Christ as much as Loki . . . after the death of a Hebrew philosopher Yeshua (whose

name we have corrupted into Jesus) he became regarded as a god, a cult sprang up, which was afterwards connected with the ancient Hebrew Jahweh-worship, and so Christianity came into being—one mythology among many. . . . Now all this you must have heard before: it is the recognized scientific account of the growth of religions. (Lewis, 2004, pp. 230-231)

In other words, the youthful Lewis was an acolyte of and fervent subscriber to the then standard J. G. Frazer *Golden Bough*/Evolutionary Theory of Religion which was opinion masquerading as science. Thus, Lewis started out at Oxford as a determined and somewhat smug atheist. However, he found his confident naturalistic, materialist faith being repeatedly shaken. Lewis's pilgrimage from atheism to Christianity was chronicled in his *Surprised by Joy* (Lewis, 1955) and in a fictionalized version in *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Lewis, 1933 and 2014). Five years after accepting his post at Magdalen, he found himself becoming a theist and eventually—horrors!—a Christian (Downing, 2002; Heck, 2017). This was not exactly a popular or even tolerated step in Interwar English academia.

For an idea of what abandoning atheism for Christianity meant in British intellectual circles of the time, Virginia Woolf's reaction to T. S. Eliot's conversion to Christianity is illuminating. Writing to her sister in 1928 (almost contemporary with Lewis's turn to Christianity in the early 1930s), Woolf recounted with impeccable self-assurance in the "credibility" of her own secular "faith":

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic believer in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene about a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God (Hastings, 1987).

Having switched sides in the modern worldview wars as an adult, Lewis continued his academic work, but he now also began to give a good deal of thought to the implications of that for his work and for what might be expected of him as a Christian. He started to read and study intensively the New Testament in the original Greek, he thought deeply about the Christian faith, and

he realized that his new religious commitment actually deepened his understanding and appreciation of his area of specialization, the Middle Ages.

In 1936, Lewis published his first scholarly monograph, *The Allegory of Love* (Lewis, 1936) to rave reviews and it appeared that he had settled down to the stereotypical life of the elite British academic: publishing scholarly articles here and there, giving erudite lectures at various scholarly venues, and gathering one's lecture notes occasionally into abstruse tomes with a readership of half a dozen other specialists.

But then something happened: C. S. Lewis began to break out of the Oxbridge professorial playground. Perhaps it was because his interests expanded as he began to move into his fifth decade, often a time of reassessment for thoughtful individuals and of exploration of new vistas. Perhaps it was because the circle of writers, the Inklings, he had become associated with in Oxford (J. R. R. Tolkien and others) challenged him to expand his horizons (Glyer, 2007; Zaleski, 2015). Perhaps it was because less than twenty years after he had served in the trenches of the Great War and been seriously wounded that another World War, likely to be even more gruesome than the first one, was looming on the horizon (Michelson, 2017).

However, the most likely explanation was that Lewis had become increasingly concerned with the obvious decline of the Western Natural Law/objective morality tradition. Moral, cultural and philosophical developments in Britain seemed to call for greater activism on the part of those who adhered to traditional, Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian values. (Lewis, 1940a; Lewis, 1955a; Hughes, 1961; Chadwick, 1975; Mitzman 1985; Ritzer, 1999; Taylor, 2007). For Lewis, this meant undertaking the articulation of a critique of modern "disenchantment" (to use Max Weber's phrase) and the relativistic worldview which had taken flight with the Enlightenment, fueled by scientism and by what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre later described as emotivism in his account of the failure of the Enlightenment Project that was the foundation for virtually all modern thought (MacIntyre, 2007). This inevitably drew Lewis into the realm of Public Intellectual.

WHAT IS A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL?

An account of how C. S. Lewis became a Public Intellectual naturally raises the question “What is a Public Intellectual?” Briefly and, perhaps, somewhat impressionistically, the term seems to have originated in 19th century France to describe scholars, writers, thinkers, and artists who were advocates of a cause, such as in the Dreyfus anti-Semitism case. It soon came to describe the commitment by intellectuals—defined broadly—to political or civic activism (Brick, 2011). It should be mentioned that while there is an American Public Intellectual tradition—exemplified by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Menand, 2002)—this did not have much traction in Europe and does not impact the present analysis.

Alan Lightman, a professor of humanities at MIT, offers the following relevant elaborations (2023):

1. A Public Intellectual is usually trained in a specific discipline (biology, history, economics) and usually is on a university faculty. “When such a person decides to write and speak to a larger audience than their professional colleagues, he or she becomes a ‘public intellectual’.”
2. There are levels of Public Intellectuals: Level I involves “Speaking and writing for the public exclusively about your discipline.” Level II involves “Speaking and writing about your discipline and how it relates to the social, cultural, and political world around it.” An example would be James Watson’s book *The Double Helix*.
3. And, finally, at Level III the intellectual is “elevated to a symbol, a person that stands for something far larger than the discipline from which he or she originated.” This is by invitation only: “A Level III intellectual is asked to write and speak about a large range of public issues, not necessarily directly connected to their original field of expertise at all.” The intellectual usually becomes a symbol or a brand.

Thus, a Public Intellectual is a scholar who goes beyond his academic remit to speak to the entire world, partly as a result of being able to employ effective communication skills. Eventually, Richard A. Posner, writes, such scholars become a brand (2002). Einstein is an excellent example: once having achieved scientific renown, he was asked for his opinions and to give lectures on religion, ethics, philosophy, international politics, and a multiplicity of other subjects that

had nothing to do with theoretical physics. His photos even expressed the brand when published without comment. As a symbol, Einstein became the epitome of human rationality and nobility. Others examples might include Carl Sagan, Susan Sontag, and Steven Jay Gould.

THE MAKING OF A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Let us turn now to the evolution of C. S. Lewis from obscure and harmless literary scholar to his emergence as a nationally (and soon internationally) recognized Public Intellectual during the years 1938 to 1944. This will be traced through a series of relatively brief vignettes, sixteen steps or stages that resulted in C. S. Lewis becoming a Public Intellectual.

1. The first step came on September 23, 1938, when the London publisher John Lane/The Bodley Head issued a strange work of science fiction called *Out of the Silent Planet* (Lewis, 1938). Of course, one might ask, aren't all works of science fiction more or less strange? What made this bizarre was that the author was the unassuming Oxford don, C. S. Lewis, whose two previous books (mentioned above) had been an autobiographical allegory (1933 and 2014) which was so allegorical that a subsequent edition had to apologize for "needless obscurity" and add explanatory running headlines so that mostly clueless readers would have some idea as to what was actually going on (2014); and an arcane scholarly study of medieval love poetry (1936).

At any rate, from a man comfortably ensconced in the thrilling precincts of Medieval literary history, the publication of a science fiction novel was a clear move toward a re-enchantment of his persona, a harking back to his long-standing search for what he called "Joy" or *sehnsucht*, a return to his juvenile preoccupation with the epic excitement of myth, especially Norse mythology (Lewis, 1955b; Carnell, 1974).

Lewis's venture into the sometimes mythical world aspect of sci-fi (what is today usually called fantasy) was the outcome of a conversation with J. R. R. Tolkien. As they were discussing modern imaginative writing (i. e. fantasy), Lewis remarked . . . there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to write some ourselves." While Tolkien, as was often the case with his literary work, never got around to completing his time travel assignment, Lewis rapidly penned *Out of the Silent Planet* and in short order produced two

more volumes of what became a trilogy by 1944 addressing an entirely new audience (Carpenter, 1979).

2. Next comes the primary context in which Lewis's development as a Public Intellectual came about. This was in the main during the dark and grim years of World War II which broke out September 1, 1939 (Phillips, 2002; Demy, 2012, McCusker, 2014). The impact of the war cannot be overstated on life in Great Britain or, for that matter, in most of the world. Because of this, World War II has to be given a bit more attention.

By 1940 Hitler's armies had conquered most of Western Europe. It had started the Nazification process in most of Western Europe and had begun to greatly expand a network of concentration and extermination camps. In July 1941, Hermann Göring had authorized in writing planning for the "total solution of the Jewish problem," setting in motion the Holocaust (Browning, 2007). Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe launched a devastating bombing attack on Britain. All in all, things looked very bad indeed for the future of Western Civilization, humane values, and Christian morality. These are themes that would stand out in Lewis's wartime writings and after.

On September 3, 1939, Britain and then France declared war on Germany. (Curiously they did not declare war on the USSR.) Hitler responded on September 6, by unleashing the first Luftwaffe air raids against the UK. Over the next nine months, bombings of Britain would total nearly such 400 assaults. By the end of the war, the Nazis would launch some 32,870 bombing raids on the British Isles (UK National Archives, 2024).

After a lull during the winter of 1939/1940, often called the "Phony War" or *Sitzkrieg*, in the spring of 1940, the Nazi *Blitzkrieg* was unleashed. The Germans swept across Western Europe, conquering Denmark and Norway in April; Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg in May. This led to the six-week Battle of France (May 10 to June 25, 1940) which ended with the ignominious defeat of the French (Taylor, 1958).

Germany's euphoria over the triumph in France knew almost no limits: its arch enemy France had been humiliated, it had conquered almost all of Western Europe, and though Hitler had expected a million German deaths in defeating France, in the end, the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe losses were less than 30,000. With both his Western and Eastern fronts secured—Germans were rightly paranoid about having to deal with a two-front problem—like *The Lord of*

the Rings's Satanic Sauron, Hitler now turned the full force of his monstrous machinations Westward toward Great Britain.

On the same day that the Nazi invasion of France began, Winston Churchill, an outspoken opponent of appeasement and implacable foe of Hitler, had become British Prime Minister. This ended Hitler's hope for some kind of coexistence with Britain. Thus, in July 1940, Hitler launched the all-out air attack on the UK now known as the Battle of Britain, aiming to brutally knock the British out of the war. From July 10 to September 7, 1940, the Luftwaffe pounded the British Isles, staging 3,200 air raids, primarily on British airfields; it was the first battle in history to take place entirely in the air.

The attempt failed and prevented a Nazi land invasion of England. Hitler followed up with the savage Blitz bombing of the United Kingdom between September 1940 and May 1941, now designed primarily to punish and demoralize the British rather than push them out of the war. In comparison to 3,598 air raids over the UK in the first twelve months of the war between September 7, 1939 and September 7, 1940, the Blitz featured 14,469 bomber attacks in the space of eight months. The result was to kill some 20,000 people in London and 40,000 nationwide, and leave substantial portions of the heavily targeted British capital devastated and unsafe (Gaskin, 2005).

Hitler's actions were based on the same absurd and immoral assumptions that strategic bombing planners made everywhere: the point was to demoralize and terrorize the civilian populations through devastating, relentless, and deadly attacks, thereby turning the psychological tide of the war decisively in favor of the bombers. In the event, things almost always had the opposite result, turning the victims of strategic bombing schemes into ever more fervent supporters of their regimes and despisers of those raining death and destruction down on them from on high (Overy, 2013).

The Blitz ceased only when Hitler's attention was turned in June of 1941 to his long-meditated attack on his soon-to-be erstwhile ally, Stalin's Soviet Union. On the other hand, the bombing of Britain would continue until March 29, 1945, with another 14,801 air raids over the next four years. A sometimes ignored consequence of the Blitz is that it likely consumed military resources that Hitler would later find himself desperately needing on the Russian front.

It was into this desperate situation that C. S. Lewis came to bring encouragement, a sane perspective, and hope in a world wearied by war. A

quotation from the noted poet Ruth Pitter (and later a friend of C. S. Lewis) sums it up well:

There are air raids at night. The factory was dark and dirty. And I remember thinking—well—I must find somebody or something because like this I cannot go on. I stopped in the middle of Battersea Bridge one dreadful March [1943] night when it was cold, and wind was howling over the bridge, and it was dark as the pit, and I stood and leaned against the parapet and thought—like this I *cannot* go on. And it didn't come to me at once but some time afterwards I heard the broadcast talks of C. S. Lewis, and I at once grappled them to my soul, as Shakespeare says . . . I got every word of his that I could, and I could see by hard argument there was only one way for it. I had to be intellectually satisfied as well as emotionally because at that time of life [Pitter was 45 in 1943] one doesn't just fall into it in adolescent emotion, and I was satisfied at every point that it was the one way and the hard way to do things (King, 2008).

The importance of the War in Lewis's life and work is just now beginning to be fully appreciated and many of the previously hidden or ignored aspects of that period are being excavated by Joe Ricke, Jim Stockton, and others.

3. On October 22, 1939, scant weeks after World War II had begun, a third important event marked the progress of C. S. Lewis's becoming a Public Intellectual. Somewhat surprisingly since he was a layman, Lewis was invited to give the evening sermon from the pulpit of the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin. This was the first sermon he had ever given, the subject was about learning in war-time, and it was delivered to a standing room only audience (Ricke, 2021). Lewis's message was right on point for war-time students, professors, and, actually, everyone in Britain: he contended that in war-time just as in peace-time, each of us has his or her task or calling and should carry it out (Lewis, 1949a). In fact,

war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun. We are mistaken when we compare war with 'normal life'. Life has never been normal.

Secondly, Lewis argued, it is generally recognized that “The learned life . . . is, for some, a duty . . . And every duty is a religious duty, and our obligation to perform every duty is therefore absolute.” If in peacetime, we thought that “the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was, in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter, [then] we can think so still.” (ibid.)

4. October 18, 1940 saw the appearance of a small book entitled *The Problem of Pain* as part of a new “Christian Challenge” series. Its author? It was the science fiction-writing, sermon-giving Professor Lewis who was now moving into new realms: those of theology and philosophy (Lewis, 1940b). His task was to confront the intellectual problems raised by suffering, not how to cope with actual pain. Lewis was well-suited for this since his education in Oxford’s rigorous Greats curriculum included philosophy. In fact, in the year prior to his 1925 appointment at Magdalen College, he had served as an interim philosophy professor at another Oxford college.

Secondly, as Lewis wrote in the preface, the problem of evil had been a primary reason for his own early atheism (Root, 2009). His argument was that the existence of pain (i.e. evil) was connected with the Adamic Fall. Evil was the unavoidable consequence of the creation of an independent and unchangeable nature coupled with human freedom. Human freedom has to include the possibility of making good choices as well as bad choices. That, unavoidably, involves evil choices and human suffering as well.

5. The following year, on April 9, 1941, during the Nazi blitz, Lewis began to give lectures to another new, distinctly non-academic audience: the men and women of the British Royal Air Force at various camps and training posts in the UK. What could he have to say to listeners most of whom were not interested in academia and who were primarily hoping that they could fend off the Luftwaffe and keep their own lives at the same time?

Charles Gilmore, a contemporary witness, notes that though Lewis was an experienced college professor, this unacademic, wildly diverse group of listeners was a new one for him. Lewis “never showed any emotion, although I think that his listeners knew instinctively that his thoughts had been hammered out in the furnace rather than stored inside a glacier.” His lectures, even to those who might not have been very interested in them, were lit “up with such grace and

clarity that, long after what he actually said had been forgotten, the memory of many who heard him was that he had shown to them a sterling and direct purpose . . . sharp and clear as a diamond with many lights, whether he was speaking to a hundred or to a dozen.” (Gilmore, 2005) Though Lewis was skeptical about his impact (“I’ve just given some talks to the R. A. F. at Abington . . . and as far as I can judge they were a complete failure” (Lewis, 2004c), it is undeniable that he had taken yet another step toward becoming recognized as a Public Intellectual by an increasingly wider circle of listeners.

6. This was followed on May 2, 1941 with the appearance of a definitely peculiar correspondence in *The Guardian* church weekly entitled “The Screwtape Letters,” purporting to be from an elderly senior devil named Screwtape to a newbie apprentice devil called Wormwood. “The idea would be to give all the psychology of temptation *from* the other point of view” (Lewis, 2004b). Though Lewis modestly “denied” authorship (“I have no intention of explaining how the correspondence which I now offer to the public fell into my hands” (Lewis, 1942d), it was plain that he had scored yet another unusual success with yet another new, extra-curricular audience.

7. On June 8, 1941, Lewis ascended once more the pulpit of Oxford’s University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, and delivered a sermon entitled “The Weight of Glory” (Lewis, 1949b). Word of mouth concerning his first St. Mary’s sermon was by all accounts positive since he was greeted by a standing room only audience for the second, which many claim was his finest single public address. (Anderson, 2007) Lewis’s premise was that the great Christian virtue of Love had been replaced in modern times by other “half-hearted” desires. Thus, “when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea” we reject the good for the bad. In the end, “We are far too easily pleased.” Lewis concluded that because of God’s glory and Christ’s coming, “There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat ...” (Lewis, 1949b).

8. Less than two months later, August 6, 1941 found Lewis in front of a microphone at the BBC opening a five-week series of religious broadcasts (Hooper, 1981; Marsden, 2017; Phillips, 2002; McCusker, 2014) Though he had no previous radio experience, his timing and radio voice were perfect (Keefe, 1971).

Despite war-time censorship requirements, the real person came through to his radio listeners.

The lectures went so well that Lewis was invited to give four series in all, which were then published between 1942 and 1944 (Lewis, 1942a; 1943b; 1944): these broadcast talks were eventually revised and amplified and published as *Mere Christianity* (Lewis, 1952; Hooper 1981). Apart from the Narnian Chronicles, *Mere Christianity* has proven to be Lewis's most perennial work, influential among Christians and non-Christians and selling more than 20 million copies in nearly forty languages (Marsden, 2017).

The broadcast talks also brought what would be a lifelong burden to Lewis since "as the aftermath of those *Broadcast Talks* I gave early last summer, I had an enormous pile of letters from strangers to answer" (Lewis, 2004d). This was the beginning of an avalanche of letters that he would uninterruptedly receive up until his death in 1963, letters which he felt obligated to respond to.

9. December 1-3, 1941, marked another stage in the emergence of Lewis as a Public Intellectual. He gave another set of public lectures, the Ballard Matthews Lectures. These were of a purely academic kind dealing with John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and were published in 1942 as *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Lewis, 1942c). Apart from affirming his increasing fluency and demand as a public lecturer, as we shall see, this book also set the stage for a subsequent fictional publication.

10. In the Michaelmas fall term of 1941 at Oxford University, Stella Aldwinckle, who was Chaplain to Women Students at Oxford as part of St. Aldate Church's Oxford Pastorate, met with students at Somerville College who "are disillusioned about religion or think they are" (Aldwinckle, 2015; Hooper, 1996a; Hooper, 1996b; Hooper, 2005b; Stockton, 2012; Heck, 2012). The meeting decided that what was needed was an "open forum for the discussion of the intellectual difficulties connected with religion and with Christianity in particular." (Hooper 1996 b) The result was the creation, in December 1941, of the Oxford Socratic Club, which held its first meeting on January 26, 1942. The Socratic, as it came to be called, was organized under Aldwinckle's chairmanship and the President turned out to be that selfsame Oxford medieval literary historian we have been talking about. He wrote about the club: "Socrates had exhorted men to 'follow the argument wherever it led them.': the Club came into existence to apply his principle to one particular subject matter—the pros and cons of the Christian Religion" (Lewis, 1942-1943).

Lewis's participation in the Socratic was both courageous and characteristic, since it exposed him to public defeat or ridicule in the confines of an Oxford that was hostile to religion, especially Christianity. He was moving toward Public Intellectual, becoming more and more dauntless as time passed.

The Socratic Club was so effective that the atheist philosopher Antony Flew later identified it as "a group that was really at the center of what intellectual life there was in wartime Oxford. The Socratic Club was a lively forum for debates between atheists and Christians and I was a regular participant in its meetings." It is not unlikely that Flew was influenced by Lewis over time in his shift from atheism to theism. "When the BBC recently asked if I had absolutely refuted Lewis's Christian apologetic, I replied: 'No. I just didn't believe there was a sufficient reason for believing it. But of course when I later came to think about theological things, it seemed to me that the case for the Christian revelation is a very strong one, if you believe in any revelation at all.'" (Flew, 2008)

11. In 1942, Lewis continued to be extremely prolific: in addition to two more series of BBC talks, he gave the British Academy's annual Shakespeare lecture on "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem," on April 22 (Lewis, 1942b); he appeared on the BBC *Brains Trust* program in May (along with C. E. M. Joad and Julian Huxley); and, finally, on July 19, Lewis participated in *The Anvil*, a new religious version of the *Brains Trust* moderated by Dr. Welch (Heck, 2023). Appearances on these talk shows might be said to constitute certification of Lewis as a Public Intellectual.

12. In February 1943, Lewis journeyed from Oxford to give the Riddell Memorial Lectures at King's College of the University of Durham. The purpose of the Riddell lectures, which had been established in 1928, was to explore the relationship between religion and contemporary thought (Lucas, 1995). The book version of these lectures was published as *The Abolition of Man* (Lewis, 1943a). This lecture and subsequent book were Lewis's first ostensibly secular ventures as a Public Intellectual; Alan Jacobs calls it "the most profound of Lewis's cultural critiques" (Jacobs, 2005). Lewis later wrote that *The Abolition of Man* "is almost my favourite among my books, but in general has been almost totally ignored by the public" (Lewis, 2007b).

Lewis felt compelled to write this book for three reasons (Green and Hooper, 2002):

—the responses to his first series of BBC broadcast lectures in August of 1941, dealing with what he called "The Law of Human Nature,"

—the fact that a number of speakers and papers presented at the Oxford Socratic Club openly questioned the existence of an objective moral law, and

—Lewis's growing conviction that civilization was a rather fragile flower and needed continual nourishing to survive. Already in 1935 he had written:

One of the most dangerous errors instilled into us by nineteenth century progressive optimism is the idea that civilization is automatically bound to increase and spread. The lesson of history is the opposite; civilization is a rarity, attained with difficulty and easily lost. The normal state of humanity is barbarism, just as the normal surface of our planet is salt water... (Lewis, 1939)

Lewis's powerful critique of moral relativism in *The Abolition of Man* and his reasoning as to the probable consequences remain as relevant today as they did in 1943 (Lucas, 1995; Ward, 2021).

13. A final small, but significant indicator that Lewis was well on his way toward Public Intellectual status came on April 18, 1943. He was invited to respond to questions on Christianity before the Electric and Musical Industries Christian Fellowship at the EMI Head Office in Middlesex (Lewis, 1970).

Sample question and reply: "Supposing a factory worker asked you: 'How can I find God?' How would you reply?"

Lewis: "I don't see how the problem would be different for a factory worker than for anyone else."

14. On April 20, 1943, John Lane/The Bodley Head published Lewis's second sci-fi: *Perelandra. A Novel* (Lewis, 1943c). This story was a deliberate re-working of the Temptation and Fall of Mankind inspired by the author's 1942 *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, only this time set on Venus, where the temptation is successfully resisted.

15. More confirmations of Lewis's rise to the Public Intellectual class bloomed in 1943 and continued thereafter. His byline began to appear frequently in various popular (as opposed to academic) print media including *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Spectator*, *Time and Tide*, *La France Libre*, *World Dominion*, and others (Hooper, 2005a). Though many of these dealt with Christianity, others were typical Public Intellectual essays.

16. The final entry in this series of vignettes delineating C. S. Lewis's evolution from cloistered academic to Public Intellectual was the publication of the third and last volume of his sci-fi trilogy, *That Hideous Strength. A Modern Fairy Tale for Grown-ups* (Lewis, 1945, completed in 1944). This was an explicit fictional account of the argument presented in his Durham University lectures: “[*That Hideous Strength*] is a ‘tall story’ about devilry, though it has behind it a serious ‘point’ which I have tried to make in my *Abolition of Man*.” (Lewis, 1945) In a later letter, Lewis summarized the plot of his “modern fairy tale” as an elaboration of the conflict of “Grace against Nature and Nature against Anti-Nature (modern industrialism, scientism, & totalitarian politics)” (Lewis, 2007).

Lewis's trilogy proved to be a remarkable demonstration of his ability to transform academic prose ideas into modern myth (Michelson, 2022). It also solidified his standing with an audience unlikely to encounter him through the other venues at his disposal such as Christian apologetics or literary history. This “public” was later confirmed by his contributions to sci-fi periodicals such as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (Lewis, 1956; Lewis, 1958) and in a fascinating 1963 taped discussion of Science Fiction with Kingsley Amis and Brian Aldiss (Lewis, Amis, and Aldiss, 1965). He is also acknowledged along with Tolkien as one of the founders of modern fantasy (James, 2012).

By 1944, C. S. Lewis's evolution from harmless professor to Public Intellectual was complete.

CONCLUSION

The argument of this paper is that between 1938 and 1944, C. S. Lewis metamorphosed from a more or less typically cloistered Oxford scholar with a fairly narrow academic focus into a Public Intellectual whose take on issues of the day (as well as other matters) was widely sought. He went from a mild-mannered professor to an “unlikely preacher” gracing the wartime pulpit of the University Church, from civilian lecturer speaking to the Royal Air Force during the saturation Blitz bombing of Britain, to the acceptance of a call to address war-torn Great Britain nationally on the BBC, from popular science fiction to clever satires of the Devil. No longer limited to a purely academic audience, by 1944, Lewis had become a “brand” willing to participate in no-holds-barred exchanges of ideas across the spectrum of contemporary life and society.

This was particularly striking because most of this development took place during the shocking violence and destruction of the first truly industrialized military conflict, World War II. The British public in effect bonded with the rational, calm, and winsome voice of Lewis during an era markedly lacking in such characteristics. Even Lewis's obvious, yet imperturbable and rational commitment to the classical Christian faith struck an appealing note in a time when relativism, emotivism, nihilism, fascism, communism, totalitarianism and myriad other destructive isms flourished and led to despair and savagery. In an age of barbarism and anxiety, Lewis was perceived as a humane scholar deeply concerned about the prevailing philosophical, moral, and ethical climate, and willing to suggest clear-sighted alternatives.

This crucial turn in the career trajectory of C. S. Lewis from stereotypical academic to Public Intellectual during one of the most perilous episodes in modern history also explains the longevity and continually expanding influence of C. S. Lewis and his works (Marsden, 2016). By the twenty-first century, Lewis's writings had become so pervasive that millions of copies of his books are sold every year. A poll in 2000 not only ranked *Mere Christianity* as first among the 100 most significant books with a significant effect on Christians this century, but noted that "By far, C. S. Lewis was the most popular author and *Mere Christianity* the book nominated most often. Indeed, we could have included even more Lewis works, but finally we had to say: 'Enough is enough; give some other authors a chance'" (The Editors, 2000).

While Lewis's influence, of course, owes to many other key factors including the innumerable ways in which his work keeps on deeply intersecting with an impressively wide public and areas of writing (Phemister and Lazo, 2009), his uncanny ability to continue to speak as a Public Intellectual even seventy years after his death certainly is a key aspect of the on-going Lewis phenomenon and is an important but often neglected factor in understanding the perennial success of C. S. Lewis.

Lastly, note should be taken of the downside of being a Public Intellectual perforce in the public eye almost continuously. Lewis was under considerable pressure on a daily basis since his every statement and action were being scrutinized not only by his often overly enthusiastic "fans," but also by his enemies and by the enemies of his ideas and Christianity. One should not underestimate the stress of needing to be constantly on guard and constantly

concerned with letting his side down or bringing it into disrepute, even if this was often attempted by deliberately falsifying his words and writings.

One illustration will suffice: in 1944, George Orwell briefly reviewed Lewis's *Beyond Personality* broadcast talks (Orwell, 1944). He was highly critical of Lewis's style ("it is not really necessary to insult your hearers with homey little asides"); indeed, in Orwell's view, Lewis's book is a "silly-clever religious book," and most people who write such books "were frank admirers of Fascism as long as it was safe to be so." Lewis's "chummy little wireless talks . . . are not so unpolitical as they are meant to look" but are part of "the big counter-attack against the Left." In sum, Lewis is a Fascist by implication, his writing is bad, his arguments feeble, and his motives are suspect from the start. Amusingly, Orwell mentions that Lewis and his ilk target writers "who are associated in the popular mind with Science and Rationalism" such as T. H. Huxley, H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, and C. E. M. Joad. These anti-Science and anti-Rationalist writers, such as Lewis, Chesterton, and Ronald Knox, Orwell claimed, "never had much difficulty demolishing" Huxley and company, "though I notice that most of the demolished ones are still there, while some of the Christian apologists themselves begin to look rather faded." This is ironic because the noted philosopher Joad became a Christian precisely because of his intellectual jousting with Lewis.

A quotation from Ruth Pitter's war-time poem "The Bridge," which was directly influenced by Lewis's work, summarizes the impact and significance of C. S. Lewis the Public Intellectual:

Where is the truth that will inform my sorrow?
I am sure myself that sorrow is not the truth.
These lovely shapes of sorrow are empty vessels
Waiting for wine: they wait to be informed....
War shatters the peacock-jars: let us go over.
Indeed we have no choice but to go over.
There is always a way for those who must go over:
Always a bridge from the known to the unknown.
When from the known the mind revolts and despairs
There lies the way, and there we must go over... (Pitter, 1969)

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