K. Alan Snyder and Jamin Metcalf

Many Times and Many Places. C. S. Lewis and the Value of History


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Many people are familiar with C. S. Lewis the Christian apologist, the writer of the Narnian children’s books, the creator of a science fiction trilogy and the Screwtape Letters, the author of a massive correspondence (some 3,300+ letters extant), and—though considerably fewer are aware of it—a scholar whose major academic works are still key publications on medieval literary history. Despite this, almost no one seems to recognize that Lewis as a scholar was primarily a historian or to take into account this aspect of his work.

It is to rectify this situation that the senior author, K. Alan Snyder (Southeastern University FL), a specialist in American history who wrote America Discovers C. S. Lewis (2016); and Jamin Metcalf (Journey Church AZ), a pastor and classical curriculum teacher interested in the creative arts have written this book. Their approach is to examine 1) the historical nature of Lewis’s education; 2) his concern with an often abused historiographical fundamental periodization; 3) Lewis’s take on the problem of historicism which was and has been a frequent approach to history especially in the last two centuries; and, finally, 4) how Lewis’s ideas about imagination, especially historical imagination, play a role in both his historical work and his fictional writings. Their conclusion is that Lewis’s works derive much of their power from historical perspectives which enabled him to live in many times and many places (hence the title of the
book), as well as from his deeply informed literary imagination which was “awash with history.”

The first chapter of the book is devoted to a survey of Lewis’s academic training. They successfully make the case that early twentieth Oxford prepared him well to write historical works and to function as a historian. (pp. 15-30) This is followed by a brief discussion of “History in Lewis’s Published Works,” highlighting examples of historiographical activity in Lewis’s writings to illustrate their case. (pp. 30-34) One distinction that deserves further discussion here is differences between the approach and methodology of literary historians and those of historians as such. This would nuance Lewis’s position more clearly, but doesn’t affect the principal argument.

The second chapter discusses Lewis’s views on historical periodization, which played a significant role in his ideas and work. It is here that Lewis’s well-known critique of the concept of the Renaissance appears, drawn largely from his Oxford history of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (1954) and his Cambridge inaugural lecture *De Descriptione Temporum* (1955). The authors correctly summarize Lewis’s argument that the idea of the Renaissance was and is mythology in the negative sense, how it hindered the work of literary historians, and its importance in Lewis’s writings. (pp. 51-61)

Lewis’s inaugural concentrates on an elaboration of his challenge to the Enlightenment’s periodization of history: classical history (good), the Dark Ages (bad), the Renaissance (good), and the modern era (even better). Lewis posits instead a tripartite division of the past, probably influenced—the authors argue—by Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man*: pre-Christian, Christian, post-Christian. This torpedoes Enlightenment concepts of an appalling Dark Ages and the astonishing re-birth called the Renaissance. The lecture then goes on to develop Lewis’s idea of a Great Divide between the first two eras and the modern era. (pp. 38-51, 61-64)

Chapter Three deals with Lewis’s critique of historicism, what he called the claim that the “inner meaning” of history can be discovered by human reason alone. This also involves the all-to-frequent idea that one knows where “history is going” and other historical inevitabilities. Lewis points out that the historicism (as practiced by Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Nazism, as well as by religious people, both the hoaxers and the sincere who argue God is on their side) is a metaphysical or even theological activity and not a historical one. Lewis does not
argue that history doesn’t have meaning: he just calls into question the presumption that one can know what God is thinking apart from revelation. In general, the authors present a clear and cogent account of Lewis’s ideas concerning historicism as well as its tragic implications. (pp. 67-81)

Chapter Four moves on to a discussion of the role of historical imagination in historical work. The authors contend that Lewis “argued for a unique approach that privileged the role of the imagination both in the study and composition of history.” (p. 84) This is drawn from a synopsis of Lewis’s understanding of imagination, of how this was one of the foundations of his work on literary history, and the consequences of Lewis’s approach. (pp. 84-103) The argument draws on Lewis’s epistemology as it developed over time, for example in his spiritual autobiography Surprised by Joy. Here the influence of Owen Barfield was manifest. Barfield disabused Lewis of “chronological snobbery,” the idea that more recent ideas were better than older ideas. Barfield’s book, Poetic Diction, convinced Lewis of the role of imagination in epistemology, though the authors make it a point to stress that Lewis was not—in his own words—“putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning…the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood.” Imagination is a tool, not the arbiter. (pp. 83-88)

Through all of this, Lewis remained a rationalist, an outspoken opponent of relativism. Particularly important, the authors believe, are Lewis’s exposition of this subject in two essays, a 1930s piece entitled “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” a critique of Ogden and Richards The Meaning of Meaning (1923) in which Lewis argued that language is “incurably” metaphorical; and his 1945 “Meditation in a Toolshed,” which expounds on the idea that we can experience things in two ways: by “looking at them,” direct observation, which is the method of science, and by “looking along them,” experiencing them internally, which is the method of literature. The authors observe that this approach has many similarities with Chesterton’s Everlasting Man which urges that historians need to see things “from the inside” as well as from the outside. (pp. 88-90) In passing, it could be noted that both of Lewis’s approaches to imagination have a lot in common with the work of the Oxford historian R. G. Collingwood, who was Lewis’s colleague at Magdalen College from 1936 to 1941 and author of The Idea of History (1946). The chapter concludes with illustrations from Lewis’s writings related to
imagination, which they, and Lewis, consider foundational to historical enquiry. It is also the basis for a defense of history as a liberal art. (pp. 98-102) There are numerous pitfalls involved with this emphasis on imagination, but Lewis rarely seems to fall into them.

The final chapter, Chapter Five, entitled “Lewis’s Fiction: Awash with History,” is by far the longest (nearly 50 pages) and might be considered the core of the book. The authors’ purpose here is to examine how Lewis’s understanding of history was reflected in his use of history in fiction. Lewis was not, however, a writer of historical fiction. Rather, he uses his comprehensive knowledge of the past to develop his story lines, whether these be set in a mythical past (Till We Have Faces), in spiritual worlds (The Screwtape Letters, The Great Divorce), contemporary Britain (the science fiction trilogy), in an imaginary otherworld (Narnia) or in his own biography (The Pilgrim’s Regress). As it was for the protagonist of Pilgrim’s ’ Regress so too for others actors in Lewis’s fiction: “History serves as a guiding light, exposing the fallacies of worldly philosophies and directing seekers toward the path of truth.” (p. 108) The thesis that understanding Lewis the historian is critical to any understanding of Lewis the author of an astonishingly varied fiction oeuvre is well-documented in this chapter.

The book concludes with two appendices. The most useful is the text of an interview with Lewis’s former student, A. G. Dickens, the well-known historian of the English Reformation and member of the British Academy. The second appendix, “An Exercise in Imaginative History,” is excerpted from a 1982 dissertation. The authors ask: “Silly? Inventive? A good piece of imaginative writing?” I would go with “silly” or perhaps “puerile.”

Overall, the authors are successful in integrating the historical and the imaginative in their analysis of Lewis’s writings. They do this by demonstrating that Lewis’s works in general have an underlying continuity, something Lewis himself recognized in an October 1954 letter to the US Milton Society. He acknowledged that his books may appear to be “a very mixed bag” but they do have “a guiding thread,” namely that the imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic. It was he who made me first attempt (with little success) to be a poet. It was he who, in response to the
poetry of others, made me a critic... It was he who, after my conversion led me to
embody my religious belief in symbolical or mythopoeic forms, ranging from
Screwtape to a kind of theologized science-fiction. And it was, of course, he who
has brought me, in the last few years to write the series of Narnian stories for
children.

The ultimate goal of this book was “to present a comprehensive view of C. S.
Lewis as a historian.” (p. 151) Though this is true in principle, a book this brief
cannot do more than summarize in a sentence or few most of Lewis’s relevant
writings. Thus, it is comprehensive in surfaced much of what Lewis wrote about
history or as a historian, but has to sacrifice depth in favor of coverage. As such,
it provides a useful introduction to important aspects of Lewis’s historical
thought, a “first step towards a fuller knowledge of Lewis’s approach to history.”
(p. 60).

The book’s discussion of the interaction between Lewis the historian and
Lewis the creative writer makes a plausible case which is competently illustrated.
In addition, by rightly underlining Lewis’s essentially historical approach to both
fiction and non-fiction, the authors encourage Lewis’s readers—from neophyte
to the deeply experienced—to examine his works from a point of view that they
generally ignore. This the authors have successfully achieved by providing “a
well-rounded perspective on C. S. Lewis as a historian, a man who lived in many
times and many places.” (p. 12) Recommended for all readers.