

A Brief Biography of C. S. Lewis by Decades (1898-1963) **By Andrew Lazo**

The First Ten Years: A Happy Boyhood

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland on 29 November 1898 to Albert and Flora Lewis who already had an older son, Warren (“Warnie”). A bright and self-possessed boy, Lewis enjoyed a happy childhood. He delighted in his home life, which included loving parents, a nurse who sparked his imagination with Irish fairy tales, and a close friendship with Warnie, with whom Lewis created stories of clothed animals in a imaginary land they called “Boxen.” And one day Warnie brought him a toy garden he had made on a biscuit tin. As he looked at that lovely, tiny garden, Lewis felt for the first time a stab of longing for beauty. He called this feeling “Joy,” and the pursuit of it formed a major theme in his life. This happy life of books, stories, and the Irish countryside continued until his mother Flora tragically died of cancer in 1908. Lewis was just nine.

The Next Ten Years: Learning and Losing Faith

As a young man, Lewis began to write poetry while continuing to read many of the hundreds of books he discovered both in his home and in the booksellers. Lewis’s unhappiness in the private school setting led Albert Lewis to send his younger son to study with a private tutor for nearly three years, an environment in which Lewis thrived. W. T. Kirkpatrick taught him classics as well as that rigorous rationality which would later characterize both Lewis’s academic career and his approach to faith. Lewis loved the routine and the challenges Kirkpatrick set for him, and during this time three patterns emerged. First, Lewis became a real writer, maintaining an extensive correspondence with friends and family and writing more and more poetry. Second, he read everything he could get his hands on, including Norse and Arthurian mythology and the books of George MacDonald. And third, he lost his faith, gladly setting it aside for an enthusiastic atheism. His work with Kirkpatrick won him admission to Oxford University, but before he began his studies, World War I intervened. His nineteenth birthday, in November 1917, found Lewis on the battlefields of France.

Lewis in his Twenties: Scholarship, Friendship, and Fledgling Faith

Lewis served as a Lieutenant until he was injured in battle; he convalesced in England for the rest of the war. Lewis had earlier agreed that should anything happen to his comrade-in-arms, Paddy Moore, he would take care of Paddy’s mother. Lewis kept that promise, living with Mrs. Moore for the rest of her life. Their puzzling relationship appears to have started as a romance, but after his conversion Lewis came to call her his “mother.” After the war ended, Lewis pursued his Oxford education in earnest, achieving rare success. In four years Lewis completed two degrees (in Classics and English), each time taking the highest possible honors. Following these years of successful study, Lewis won a job as a Tutor in English at Magdalen College, Oxford, a post he continued in for nearly thirty years. His responsibilities included lecturing, writing scholarly articles and books, and tutoring individual students, and he enjoyed enormous popularity and success in his work. Also during these years, Lewis made two important friends, J. R. R. Tolkien and Owen Barfield, both of whom challenged his atheism and helped lead him back to faith. These friends walked, argued, and shared their writings with each other, and over time Lewis begin to doubt his own doubts about the existence of God. In early June of 1930 Lewis very reluctantly converted to Theism. And in 1931, Lewis took one final step toward faith,

converting from mere Theism to Christianity. Much to his surprise, he soon discovered that the Joy he had pursued all his life came from Christ. He remained convinced of the truth of Christianity throughout his life, and in many ways, his life began to open up for him once he took this step.

Thriving in his Thirties: Conversion, Inklings, and Scholarly Success

In 1930, along with Warnie and Mrs. Moore, Lewis bought The Kilns, his home for the rest of his life. Upon retiring from his career as a military officer, Warnie moved into The Kilns to stay. Having failed as a poet, Lewis turned to scholarly work and found enormous critical success with his first scholarly book, *The Allegory of Love*. That book won him the attention of the editors of the Oxford History of English Literature, who asked him to write Volume Three, on the non-dramatic writing in the 1500s. It took Lewis nine years to finish the “OHEL” which scholars still read today. Along with Tolkien and other like-minded friends, Lewis founded the Inklings, a writing community that met weekly to read aloud from their own manuscripts in progress. This group produced a number of works including Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis’s Cosmic Trilogy, and many others. The books that came out of these meetings marked the beginning for Lewis of a string of successful popular writings that continued almost uninterrupted until his death.

The Forties: Apologist, Author, and Several Sorts of Endings

During the forties, Lewis enjoyed a great deal of success and increasing fame, although some of this worked against him. He took up a role which made him most famous, that of defending the Christian faith. During World War II Lewis gave a series of talks on the BBC explaining Christianity, lectures which eventually became *Mere Christianity* and which made Lewis’s the second-most recognized voice in England, after Winston Churchill. He also published several books arguing for the reasonableness of the Christian faith, along with the phenomenally popular *The Screwtape Letters*. Though that book landed him on the cover of Time Magazine, in some ways it sealed his professional fate. Many Oxford colleagues despised the fact that Lewis published popular books about theology, a topic that fell outside his chosen field of English literature. Lewis also became a very outspoken and public Christian and the backlash likely cost him three professorships. Nevertheless, Lewis’s academic standing continued to rise as he published a number of books, essays, and poems in this period. He continued writing fiction that explored his interests in mythology and faith. This decade of Lewis’s life also saw many things come to an end including several key relationships. Fellow Inkling Charles Williams died unexpectedly in 1946. The Inklings stopped meeting to read their work to each other in 1949, and Lewis’s friendship with Tolkien began to cool. Warnie’s alcoholism increasingly separated him from his brother. And finally, Mrs. Moore died in 1950, freeing Lewis from the burden of caring for her. Exhausted on many levels, Lewis began to feel as though his creative gifts were at an end. Little did he imagine the great joys and successes that awaited him in his fifties.

The Fifties: Surprised by Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy

Lewis could scarcely have envisioned the gains that would soon succeed his losses. Within three years Lewis completed the “OHEL,” compiled the BBC broadcasts into *Mere Christianity*, penned his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, and worked on but later abandoned a book on prayer. In his “spare” time and mostly for his own amusement, Lewis wrote all seven Narnian Chronicles, which were published, one per year, from 1950 to 1956. These fairy tales

met enormous success, finding an enthusiastic and enduring audience. Clearly, Lewis's creative gifts had not deserted him. Professional success soon followed as well. Cambridge, in an almost unprecedented move, created a professorship in medieval and Renaissance literature specifically for Lewis, in part to undo the injustices he had undergone at Oxford. Though initially he had to be persuaded to accept the post, Lewis delighted in his new university along with the freedom to write this new post afforded him. And much to his surprise, Lewis also found love. Joy Davidman Gresham, an American Jewish poet and a former atheist, had come to faith in part through Lewis's books. In 1950 the two began a lively correspondence, in 1952 they met in person when Joy visited and subsequently moved to England, and by 1956 Lewis and Joy had become fast friends. And later that year, when the British government refused Joy permission to remain in England, Lewis married her in a civil ceremony in order to extend his citizenship to her and her two young sons, David and Douglas. They continued to live in separate houses, but their friendship only grew closer. Before long their civil marriage, which at first had seemed to Lewis only an act of charity, blossomed into romance for them both. In 1957, Joy fell desperately ill with cancer, helping Lewis to realize that he had fallen in love with her. Although they both thought she would soon die, they married in a religious ceremony in Joy's hospital room. But a miraculous remission gave the couple three happy years together before the cancer returned. Joy died on 13 July 1960, ending a remarkable decade for Lewis. Having lost Mrs. Moore, Charles Williams, and the Inklings, Lewis found friendship, family, and love with Joy in the last years of their lives. He found professional ease and respect with his Cambridge professorship. He also re-discovered his authorial gifts and wrote many of his best and most enduring books in this decade, including the strange and magnificent *Till We Have Faces*, a book inspired and encouraged by Joy.

The Sixties: Lastly Letting Go

During the last three years of his life, Lewis continued to enjoy his role at Cambridge and his friends, although poor health due to kidney problems limited his activities. Still, Lewis continued working, publishing a number of books, including *A Grief Observed*, an account of his grief over losing Joy. Lewis did his best to raise his stepsons, making a lasting impression on both boys, especially Douglas, who has written about his years with Lewis. By the summer of 1963, his failing health forced him to resign his Cambridge post. In July of that year, Lewis had a heart attack and slipped into a coma but he recovered, remaining alert into the autumn. But then, at 5:30 p.m. on 22 November 1963, Lewis passed away due to kidney failure and a weakened heart. He died an hour and a half before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, one week before his sixty-fifth birthday. All who knew Lewis describe him as a man of quick wit and constant laughter, profound and deliberate humility, enormous learning and intelligence, as well as a man thoroughly converted to the claims of Jesus Christ on his extraordinary life.