



## Commemorating the Life of C.S. Lewis

Fifty years ago today, while John F. Kennedy was aboard Air Force One en route to Dallas, Texas, from nearby Fort Worth, C.S. Lewis died of kidney failure at his home in Oxford, England. Though his death preceded President Kennedy's by about an hour, C.S. Lewis' passing was not noted in the papers until several days later, because of coverage of Kennedy's assassination. This week, however, Great Britain has been observing the 50th anniversary of the death of one of the finest men of letters ever produced on British soil, culminating in a ceremony today with the dedication of a memorial stone in Poet's Corner in the South Transept of Westminster Abbey.



Clive Staples Lewis, born November 29, 1898 in Belfast, Ireland, was far more than a poet. A precocious student of the humanities, Lewis (who was known to friends and family as "Jack") developed a fascination for a broad range of topics, including Norse, Irish, and Greek mythology, and nature. A series of elite tutors enabled his literary brilliance, leading to a scholarship offer from Oxford University at age 16.

Arriving at Oxford, Lewis found himself in a foreign but withal intoxicating new environment that seemed a world away from his native Ireland. A loyal subject of the British Empire, Lewis interrupted his university studies to volunteer for military service in 1917. He was sent to the Somme Valley, where he, along with so many luminaries of his generation, experienced the incomparable horrors of trench warfare. Lewis was severely wounded by friendly fire, an errant British shell that killed two of his comrades-in-arms on April 15, 1918, and was assigned to duty back in England for the duration of the war.

With the conclusion of the "War to End All Wars," Lewis returned to Oxford, where he would remain until 1954. Beginning in 1920, he received several degrees in subjects as far-ranging as Greek and Latin literature, Philosophy, and English. He was soon thereafter appointed a tutor in philosophy, and eventually became one of Oxford's most distinguished teachers, scholars, and writers.

Raised in what he came to regard as a stifling religious environment, Lewis the young intellectual became an atheist at 15, a posture that found encouragement in the skeptical halls of one of the world's greatest universities. However, his attitude toward religion and Christianity began to change in 1926,



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the year he got to know another Oxford polymath, J.R.R. Tolkien. The two became close friends, despite (as Lewis recalled later) warnings from his father in his boyhood never to trust a Catholic or a philologist; Tolkien was both. The two shared an interest in mythology and what is now called “fantasy fiction,” although Lewis always regarded Tolkien’s Middle Earth as too dark and frightening a canvass for the sort of storytelling he was starting to contemplate.

Along with Tolkien, Lewis participated in a long-running, informal discussion group, the “Inklings,” which provided much inspiration for Lewis’ considerable academic output in the area of Medieval studies.

In 1929, thanks largely to Tolkien’s influence, Lewis became a theist; two years later, he became a wholehearted Christian, embracing the Anglican creed until the end of his life.

Among converts to Christianity, Lewis must certainly be ranked with the likes of Augustine of Hippo for his enthusiasm and literary output. Not content to nurture his newfound relationship with the God of the Gospels in private, Lewis embarked upon a decades-long outpouring of apologetic literature that includes among the most lyrical and soul-stirring defenses of Christianity ever produced. C.S. Lewis, living in an increasingly secular age, was able — in classics such as *Mere Christianity*, *Surprised by Joy*, and *The Problem of Pain* — to mesmerize millions of modern sophisticates with his signature restrained erudition mingled with warmth and intimate sincerity.

Nor was his audience confined to his fellow intellectuals and seekers after religious meaning. Although Lewis never had any children of his own, he penned the sublime *Chronicles of Narnia* series — now being turned into a series of well-received blockbuster films — over the course of six years, beginning in 1950. The seven *Narnia* books, set in a fantasy alternative world, have rightly taken their place among the greatest classics of children’s and fantasy literature. Beginning with the international bestseller *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the books follow the adventures of the four Pevensie siblings and several other children, who are magically transported to Narnia from time to time to do battle with forces of evil (as embodied by the witch Jadis and her many epigones) and to become acquainted with Aslan, a magical lion who is also the Christ-figure of the Narnia universe. The *Narnia* books are not only rollicking adventure tales in the tradition of other great fantasists such as Tolkien, they are also skillfully drawn allegories that have taught Christian beliefs, including the atonement and the afterlife, to generations of readers young and old.

In 1954, Lewis, now a world-renowned scholar and writer, accepted a position at Cambridge University as Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature, where he finished his academic career.

Thanks to the movie *Shadowlands*, the great tragedy of Lewis’ life — the loss of his beloved wife Joy Gresham to cancer after only four years of marriage — is well-known. Lewis began corresponding with Joy, a gifted American writer, Jewish intellectual, and former atheist and convert to Christianity herself, in the 1950s. At the time, Gresham was separated from her alcoholic and abusive husband. After her divorce, Lewis agreed to marry her civilly so that she and her sons David and Douglas could remain in England. She was, as Lewis’ friends observed, the only woman he ever met who could truly engage with him intellectually. When Gresham was diagnosed with cancer in 1957, Lewis, realizing the love he had developed for her, married her a second time and in public in a church.

After their wedding, the cancer went into remission for several years, during which Lewis enjoyed the bliss ordinarily reserved for younger men and women with his aptly named wife. They even travelled to the Aegean together — the only time after World War I that Lewis visited the European continent. But



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Gresham's cancer eventually returned, claiming her life in 1960.

Although overwhelmed by grief, Lewis continued to take care of both of Joy's sons until the end of his own life only a few years later. Both men are still alive, with Douglas keeping the faith of Lewis and Gresham, and David returning to the Jewish faith of his mother's ancestors.

C.S. Lewis was that rarest of men, a world-class intellectual and scholar who managed to extricate himself from the temptations of secular academic vanity and to pour his prodigious energies and talents into his religious faith. In this respect, he reminds us above all of Saul of Tarsus (although his road to Damascus was not so dramatic, nor his subsequent discipleship so characterized by state persecution) — a man of letters who found no contradiction in becoming also a man of God.

*Photos of mural depicting characters from Lewis' The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe and of C.S. Lewis at age 50*



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