Lewis in the Dock: A Brief Review of the Secular Print Media's Judgment of the C.S. Lewis Centenary

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what Will called “a coherent sensibility” which allowed him, in the midst of an “outwardly uneventful life” as “a specialist in medieval literature,” to sense the sacred in the midst of that which was “pedestrian,” in the very “everydayness of life.” And Lewis’s work? Will considered *Mere Christianity* as Lewis’s most famous, *The Chronicles of Narnia* as his best-known, *The Abolition of Man* as the most pertinent for our times, and *The Screwtape Letters* as his “light masterpiece” that constantly reminds us of our spiritual nature—pointing us to what he calls our “susceptibility to the numinous.” (Will. A31)

Our second syndicated news service article, "The wonderful legacy of C.S. Lewis," (Thomas) appeared in about 350 newspapers and was written from Oxford by Cal Thomas, being published at the end of July as a brief response to the Oxbridge ‘98 C.S. Lewis Centenary celebration there. Educated at American University, Thomas also is a conservative commentator who had been a twenty-one-year veteran of broadcast journalism before he became a columnist with the Los Angeles Times Syndicate in 1984. (Riley. 323-324)

In this column Thomas wrote almost nothing about Lewis the man except to quote Tom Howard’s two remarks that Lewis had “a muscular intellect that forces a reader to focus on ultimate truths,” noting also his “modesty, ebullience and deep sincerity.” Thomas’s seemed more intent on exhorting his readers to “start reading C.S. Lewis, and be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” Therefore, most of the article focused on Lewis’s ideas—with several quotes from *The Screwtape Letters*; on his methods—mentioning how he approached each of his audiences; and on His books—mentioning that Lewis was “not a writer only for his time but for all time.” Finally, criticism is made of both the British government and of Oxford University for the embarrassing way that they both had treated Lewis, reminding us all that it was not Britain nor Oxford who recognized “his genius in literature and apologetics,” but *Time* magazine which, in 1947, put him on its cover. (C.T. “Legacy”)

A third syndicated news service article entitled, "George Sayer talks about C.S. Lewis," (Abilene) appeared on November 25, 1998 in Terry Mattingly’s “On Religion” column for the Scripps Howard News Service. Mattingly, a former columnist with the *Charlotte Observer*, now teaches journalism students at Milligan College in Johnson City, TN. (Mattingly) His articles are printed in about 350 newspapers and this particular column was the result of an interview in Malvern, England, at the home of George Sayer, former student, biographer, and friend of C.S. Lewis.

The first half of this article was a monologue by Sayer describing a walking tour with C.S. Lewis. Then, Sayer attempted to answer the question, “Why does Lewis remain such a dominant figure?” Sayer gave three basic answers: 1) as a former atheist, Lewis understood and could handle the tough questions people would ask; 2) as a talented writer and literary critic, he was able to write in several different literary genres; and 3) as a subject of two movies, new readers had been drawn to his work. This last motive, Sayer said, “would have infuriated Lewis.” He mentioned that Lewis personally disliked being a celebrity, even in his own lifetime. Lewis wanted his readers to focus on the work of literature and not on the writer of the literature. As short pieces go, this article helps the reader see Lewis through the eyes of one who actually knew him well. Among all of the centenary articles that is its strength. On the
other hand, it is a bit ironical, in light of Sayer’s comments, that, of the several Lewis biographies now in print, it is Sayer’s that many readers consider the best so far.

Our fourth syndicated news article entitled, “Author’s conversion left mark on Christianity,” (Boudreau) was written by John Boudreau, a journalist with Knight Ridder News Service. It was originally published on October 26th, in Boudreau’s home newspaper, the Contra Costa Times, in Walnut Creek, CA. As the local staff writer there on religion and ethics issues, he was reporting on an upcoming C.S. Lewis centenary celebration that was to be held on October 31st at the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley. I first read it when it was published in the Knight Ridder News Service on November 28th, when it was published in our local newspaper, the Lexington Herald-Leader.

How did Boudreau characterize Lewis? Following some opening quotations from Lewis’s spiritual biography, Surprised by Joy, Boudreau told his readers that Lewis was “one of the most quoted writers in England and America” and “one of the few writers of his generation who has never been out of print.” His appeal, Boudreau stated, was to both the intellect and the imagination. He then drew upon the positive opinions of several who had studied Lewis: pastors, John Stott of England and Earl Palmer, a speaker at the previously mentioned conference in Berkeley; professor, Wayne Martindale of Wheaton College; and psychiatrist, Armand Nicholi of Harvard Medical School. They spoke of Lewis as “a real scholar,” as someone who “could spin a great story,” and as someone “versed in belief and unbelief.” Primarily descriptive of both Lewis’s life and works, Boudreau raised only one negative issue. This concerned the detractors who had early on “criticized his ideas on pain and suffering as [being too] pat.”

Boudreau then mentioned the movie Shadowlands and the grief Lewis experienced after his wife’s death. According to Boudreau this testing of Lewis’s faith helped him to move even closer to God, even to the point of writing “one of his most important works, Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer, during his last years.” An added strength of this article is a side-bar, also by Boudreau, which gave an abbreviated list of Lewis’s books.

We move now to two newspaper articles written by non-journalists. The award-winning children’s fantasy novelist, Philip Pullman, wrote an article entitled, “The dark side of Narnia,” in the October 1st edition of The Guardian. (Pullman. “dark side”) Both a former student and lecturer at Oxford University, his book, The Golden Compass, was awarded the 1996 Carnegie Medal, England’s highest honor for children’s literature. This award had also been presented to C.S. Lewis’s book, The Last Battle, in 1956. In 1989 Contemporary Authors did a brief, but helpful bibliographical sketch on him. (CA. Vol. 127. 349-350)

At first glance, the title of Pullman’s Guardian article “The dark side of Narnia,” might imply some connection with the Star Wars movie theme or maybe even a discussion of the forces of evil that loom over the Narnian landscape. But no, after some brief comments on the centenary and on Lewis’s life, plus some positive asides about literary criticism and The Screwtape Letters, the focus of the article turned to the “dark side” that Pullman claims to have finally seen in his own adult “open-eyed reading” of the Narnia cycle. About it he wrote that “there is no doubt in my mind that it is one of the most ugly and poisonous things I’ve ever read.” He calls the train wreck at the end of The Last Battle “one
of the most vile moments in the whole of children’s literature.” To him there was no shortage of what he describes as “nauseating drivel.” Pullman’s attitude toward Lewis and his work was clearly stated in his last sentence where he included himself when he wrote that “those of us who detest the supernaturalism, the reactionary sneering, the misogyny, the racism, and the sheer dishonesty of [Lewis’s] method will still be arguing against him.” (Pullman. “dark side”) 

This broadside against Lewis’s work, especially the Narnia cycle, was not a new criticism. Pullman himself mentioned that many of these same issues had already been raised by others, referring to John Goldthwaite, Victor Watson, David Holbrook and A.N. Wilson. In a December interview in ACHUKA a British web page on children’s books, Pullman mentioned the firestorm of reactions that came from the Mere Lewis listserv, as many accused him of “mean-mindedness, spite and every kind of twisted malevolence.” He said that he was amazed at the “frothing swivel-eyed barminess of some of it.” (Thorn. “Pullman”) As an everyday lurker on Mere Lewis, I, too, read these same responses. Some indeed were just as antagonistic as Pullman stated. Others, though, were more accommodating, more willing to discuss the issues rather than attack the messenger who had brought them up, aware that Pullman’s comments were possibly overstatements that might not be true about Lewis’s overall work. (Mere Lewis, 10/6-9/98) Coincidentally, in that same ACHUKA interview Pullman reveals that he “didn’t read the whole Narnia as a boy: I read The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, and felt slightly queasy, as if I were being pressured to agree to something I wasn’t sure of.” The adult Pullman claimed that he must have been reacting to “the sneakiness of that powerful seductive narrative voice” of Lewis. (Thorn. “Pullman”) Who can really know the real reason Pullman was so negative toward Lewis? Might not the real question with Pullman’s article be not whether one could possibly find such issues in the Lewis corpus, but whether a brief newspaper article, and when he wrote it, on Lewis’s centenary, was the right time and place to vilify a fellow award-winning author. By his credentials Pullman should be both a gifted teacher and writer. Maybe he might better clarify his statements by putting them into a longer essay or a book available for all to review.

A second centenary article by a non-journalist appeared in the Toledo Blade and was entitled, "C.S. Lewis: Mere Christian: On the Occasion of the Centenary of C.S. Lewis’s Birthday.” (Toledo) Its author was Dr. Bruce Edwards, professor of English at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. Dr. Edwards received his doctorate from the University of Texas in 1981, coming then to Bowling Green. “He has written two books on Lewis and edited or contributed to four additional volumes, including the recently published C.S. Lewis Reader’s Encyclopedia, for which he served on the Editorial Advisory Board and wrote 35 entries. He has also written more than two dozen major articles for academic journals and collections.” (Union) 

Edwards’s article described Lewis as a “renowned author and critic,” as a “distinguished Oxford and Cambridge literary historian,” and as a “formidable critical talent.” But he quickly noted that most readers did not yet know this Lewis. Most knew him, ironically, in this time of “skepticism” as “the century’s most popular and influential Christian apologist.” This was where Edwards then depicted Lewis’s spiritual pilgrimage—
from the “bitter and confirmed atheist” to the “witty, articulate proponent of Christianity.” Overall Edwards article was very positive toward Lewis, both the man and his work. Dr. Edwards thought Lewis’s biographical information needed to be explored because many only knew the Anthony Hopkins’s style Lewis that was presented in the movie Shadowlands in 1993. Thus, Edwards argued that the “Lewis of Shadowlands—even conceding generous poetic license—never existed.” As for Lewis the writer, Edwards noted that Mere Christianity had become “the most widely read (and purchased) work of Christian apologetics of the last fifty years.” But it was The Chronicles of Narnia that had become his “most notable critically and commercially successful set of Christian texts.”

How did this come to be? Edwards cited two reasons: first, “Lewis’s life was thoroughly integrated,” and second, in Lewis we was seen someone “focused, not on what divides, but on what unites Christians.” And, in doing these two things, Lewis gave other Christians an example to follow, not just someone to read and study about. In my opinion Edwards did a good job in such a short essay of trying to clarify who the “real” Lewis was. Plus, as a literary critic himself, Edwards early on pointed his readers to a Lewis beyond the merely popular fiction writer, as well as beyond the “dour, retiring Lewis” distortion by Hollywood. While having written in other places about both the Lewis “hagiographers” and the super-critical skeptics, I think his caution in this centenary essay in not attacking either was very appropriate.

Turning now to the final four newspaper articles written by working journalists, the first mentioned will be an article published in The London Daily Telegraph on November 14, 1998 by A.N. Wilson, entitled “The Problem of C.S. Lewis.” (Telegraph) Wilson, whose initials stand for Andrew Norman, is well-known to most C.S. Lewis readers, having written what Pullman’s article called an excellent and fair biography of Lewis. (Pullman. “dark side”) But while the 1995 Dictionary of Literary Biography article on Wilson called his Lewis biography comprehensive, it also noted that it was controversial, one which sparked “a wide and somewhat heated debate.” (DLB 155: 321, 325) Indeed, in 1992 John Beversluis, himself a sometimes negative reviewer of the Lewis corpus, also reviewed Wilson’s biography of Lewis and titled his review, “Surprised by Freud,” an obvious reference to Wilson’s psychoanalytic approach to Lewis and to biographical writing in general. It was what Beversluis called a type of biography which was “an indistinguishable blend of fact and fiction: highly opinionated, often gossipy, occasionally offensive; interesting enough to keep us turning pages but not judicious enough to win our confidence.” (CAL 41: 193)

The Oxford-educated Wilson was described by New York Times book reviewer Alan Isler as an “English man of letters: urbane, ironic, fluent, precise, felicitously erudite and, and above all pleasurably readable.” (NYT. “Lapsed”) A voluminous novelist, biographer, writer of children’s books, book editor and columnist, Wilson has produced over one book a year since 1977, all the while, continuing to write for one London journal or another. Currently he writes a weekly opinion column for the Evening Standard, with other pieces regularly appearing in The Spectator and The Independent. (NYT. “Wasp”)

Among other important themes, Wilson’s books and essays have often reflected his
periodic reexamination of religion. From his 1972 decision to train for the Anglican priesthood up until one of his most recent books, *The Funeral of God* (1999), Wilson’s writing has clearly reflected a distancing of himself with people of faith and religion in general. I touch on this somewhat highly personal issue because in his article, “The Problem of C.S Lewis” Wilson stated that writing Lewis’s biography ten years ago “turned me into a very definite non-believer.” *(Telegraph)* But was this true? James Atlas’s *New York Times* review of Wilson’s book *Jesus* quoted Wilson as saying that “From the moment he [his father] died I stopped being religious.” Atlas also wrote that others have noted the coincidence of his religious turning “with the breakup of his marriage.” *(NYT. “Wasp”)*

With this religious issue in the background, how did Wilson portray Lewis in his centenary article? His first reference to Lewis described him as “an old Ulsterman, who enjoyed verbal fisticuffs.” From here the comparisons became quite negative as Wilson was very critical of Lewis, the religious and children’s author and the “the ‘Holy Rollers,’ the children’s literature addicts and the slightly creepy Americans who seemed to have made up some virginal or non-smoking Lewis in their own image.” Following these derogatory remarks, Wilson then became a little more positive as he focuses on Lewis the teacher, tutor and literary critic. For these he thought that “Lewis deserves our commemoration and our thanks.” *(Telegraph)*

I can appreciate Wilson’s emphasis on the importance of reading Lewis’s literary criticism, but why did he have a need to debunk the messenger who had brought the message? If Wilson felt so positive about the academic Lewis, why did he not use his whole essay space to discuss that side of Lewis instead of making the derogatory statements against those with whom he disagreed. Plus I think that Lewis would not have minded Wilson telling the reader to go even one step further than he did, and not only read Lewis’s literary criticism, but also to actually, like Lewis, read the primary sources themselves. For did not Lewis acknowledge that one of the reasons that he eventually became a Christian was because the great Western authors themselves were believers. “An atheist,” he writes, “cannot be too careful of his reading; there are traps everywhere.” *(SBJ. 191)*

Five days after Lewis’s centenary, on December 4, 1998, *The Independent* (London) published an article entitled, “Don’t let your children go to Narnia: C.S. Lewis’s books are racist and misogynist—but their worst crime is a lack of imagination.” *(Hensher, “Don’t”)* Written by free-lance journalist, novelist and art critic, Philip Hensher, its title gave the reader no doubt about the author’s opinion of C.S. Lewis and his works, especially *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Again, we had, in this article, an award-winning author. Hensher’s novel, *Kitchen Venom*, won the Somerset Maugham Award and another novel, *Pleasured*, was nominated for the 1999 WHSmith Literary Award. Hensher, a former clerk in the House of Commons, had also written a *libretto* for an opera, *Powder Her Face*, and contributed regularly to *The Spectator, The Mail on Sunday* and *The Independent*. (“P.H.” search)

Let me share with you a sample of some of the negative, almost bitter words and phrases
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that Hensher wrote: 1) the Narnian books are "something infinitely more poisonous and corrupting" than Hitler's Mein Kampf; 2) "It is the sheerest poison;" 3) "C.S. Lewis and his ghastly, priggish, half-witted, money-making drivel about Narnia" needs to be dropped "down the nearest deep hole, as soon as is conveniently possible;" 4) These "frightful books" are "revoltingly mean-minded," written "to corrupt the minds of the young with allegory, smugly denouncing anything that differs in the slightest respect from Lewis's creed of clean-living, muscular Christianity, pipe-smoking, misogyny, racism, and the most vulgar snobbery;" 5) He also see Lewis as guilty of "cheating with the plot," "doctrinaire bullying," and "some pretty unpleasant social attitudes;" 6) "The most corrupting feature of all is the poverty of the imagination." and finally 7) Give children anything else: "a bottle of vodka" or a "phial of prussic acid." instead of letting them read The Voyage of the Dawn Treader."

Considering Hensher's credentials, I first saw this article as a possible satire, sarcastically exaggerating what some of Lewis's other critics had already said. Yet, the references to censorship, book-burning and Hitler's Mein Kampf seemed a bit overdrawn, even bitter. At least both Pullman and Wilson gave Lewis some positive points on his literary criticism and on The Screwtape Letters. But in Hensher's article there was not one single positive statement about Lewis or his work. Two points were clear though about Hensher's comments. First, he wrote of knowing that "there was something wrong with the books when I read them as a child," and second, in doing so, he sensed that they were making "some fairly unhealthy designs" on him as a reader. Yes, the moral and religious themes were there, as they are there in all great literature. And they certainly have drawing power. But Lewis also emphasized the importance of free will as well. No one was ever forced to do anything in Narnia, but they were expected to face the consequences of whatever decisions they did make. Welcome to the real world! Second, Hensher mentioned allegory several times. But Lewis himself, despite Tolkien's claims, never wrote but one allegory and that was The Pilgrim's Regress.

In a letter to a Mrs. Hook in 1958 Lewis tried to clarify the difference between an allegory such as Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and his Narnian books. Aslan is a "supposition" of what Christ might become in a world like Narnia, not an "allegorical representation" of God. (LCSL. 475) Maybe Hensher, too, might one day share with us his concerns in a little intense and hostile way.

The last two centenary articles being reviewed were written from Oxford by news reporters. The first, Marjorie Miller, is a Los Angeles Times staff writer, listed in 1998 as their bureau chief in Jerusalem, but who was reporting in June, 1999 on Kosovo and Northern Ireland. Her article, "At Centenary, C.S. Lewis Provokes Catcalls, Acclaim," (Miller) appeared in the Los Angeles Times on November 24, 1998. She opened with some comments by and about Walter Hooper as he sat for an interview with her in the Bird and Baby pub that Lewis and his friends used to frequent. She then mentioned several events planned in England for the Lewis's centenary, balancing these accolades with Pullman's negative comments. She went on to review the so-called "Lewis cult" that has spawned itself "particularly among U.S. followers," referring to a Christianity Today article, the Wade Center at Wheaton, the hundreds of C.S. Lewis societies and web sites, the many visitors to Lewis's home, and even Hooper's
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sometimes over-adulation. In this section Miller then inserted a comment by Douglas Gresham that some of the exalted comments and attitudes about his stepfather would have, indeed, "brought a shudder" to Lewis. What followed was a brief sketch of Lewis's life, specifically noting his relationship to Janie Moore, his conversion and his marriage to Joy Gresham. Some comments were also made about the debate over Wilson's biography of Lewis versus Sayer's biography, noting especially differences of opinion about Lewis's relationship with Janie Moore and Joy Gresham. Ironically, in an article in which Miller has given prominence to discussing "Lewis the man," in my opinion, truly trying to balance many of the pro's and con's about Lewis, she then left one thinking that the average Lewis reader could "care less" about the man or his theology. One should just get on with reading his books, especially the Narnia books. If she had actually written more about his books, I think that she would have had an even more balanced article.

Our last news account of the centenary comes from Robert Barr, the London news editor for the Associated Press. Published on November 27, 1998, Barr announced in his title that "C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity still wins converts." His title referred to the evangelistic Alpha program now being used in churches in both the U.S. and England. While some of Lewis's life story was told, this was an article which primarily emphasized Lewis as a writer. Although Barr gave A.N. Wilson the last word on Lewis, he generally managed to balance the pro and con viewpoints about Lewis's literary work. A minor numerical error is found in the first sentence as Barr miscalculates the number of years since Lewis's death. He writes "twenty-five" while the actual number was "thirty-five." But overall this article is balanced on the literary side describing Lewis "as an Oxford don and later a Cambridge professor who won respect as a scholar of English literature and an enduring popular following for his religious writings, as well as his 'Narnia' fantasies." (Barr)

The text of each of these ten newspaper articles, even Hensher's in its own way, has pointed us both to a man and his work worthy to be honored on his centenary birthday. In my opinion, some of his critics have been patronizing and others cruel. Some have set up a "straw man." and easily knocked him for a loop. Others who have honored him, have sometimes missed his true greatness. Indeed, as suggested by some, all readers of Lewis need to go beyond his interesting life and his more popular religious and children's stories and read his great literary corpus as well. But even there we will not receive what he has to give us if we forget that it was his Christian faith and its supernatural worldview which allowed him to "enter into fuller imaginative sympathy" with the great writers of the past. (Coghill. 65) Finally, we like Lewis must not take ourselves or him too seriously. One of Lewis's greatest assets was his sense of humor. Let us remember that those who knew him personally often described him as "a man of laughter and surprises, of jokes and joy . . . of gladness foaming and ready to burgeon out at any moment." (Lindvall) In closing, I invite you to read the articles for yourself, to follow on and read deeper into Lewis and the works that spoke to his mind and heart, but do so with that delight and joy that will also draw us closer to Lewis and the One who fulfills all the deep longings of our heart.
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Lewis writes, “By an allegory I mean a composition in which immaterial realities are represented by feigned physical objects e.g. a pictured Cupid allegorically represents erotic love or, in Bunyan a giant represents Despair.”]


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———. On Religion Webpage at http://www.gospelcom.net/mattingly/(Mattingly)


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