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The Passions of C.S. Lewis as Seen in his *Collected Letters*

Jessica Shaver Renshaw

Abstract:

Rather than speaking about C.S. Lewis, we will let Jack speak about himself through his letters: what he loved, such as books, seasons/weather, walking tours, “bathing,” Ireland, animals, convalescence, Joy, and writing; what he loathed: writing letters, Americans, cities, TV, newspapers, movies, modern novels/poetry/theology; what he feared; what he didn’t understand; and what he regretted, as well as his descriptions of what he looked like, what he did well, what he did badly. I will force myself with Great Difficulty (because of all the choice bits I will have to leave out) to limit these tastes of his sixty-year, three-volume, 3,600-page, 9-1/2 pound correspondence to what can be savored in twenty minutes!

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THE PASSIONS OF C.S. LEWIS AS SEEN IN HIS *COLLECTED LETTERS*

Jessica Shaver Renshaw

“You are one of the great English letter writers,” C.S. Lewis once wrote to Dorothy Sayers. “But I’m not” (2:682-3). “You write such excellent letters that if I were a bad man I should lure you into an epistolary controversy and you wd. find you had written a book for us without knowing it: I shd. simply publish the letters” (2:728).

Instead, and without being lured, *Lewis* has “written a book for us without knowing it” and Walter Hooper has superbly edited and “simply” published it: the three-volume *Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis* (2004, 2004, 2007). Volume 1 chronicles Jack’s intellectual development up to his being hired at Oxford and becoming a Christian, Volume 2 his blossoming career as teacher, writer, and speaker, and Volume 3 the burdensome demands of his publishers and fans, the loss of his wife, and growing health problems, all of which turn his heart from this life to the next one.

With this publication, we now have all sixty years--three volumes, 3,600 pages, and 9-1/2 pounds--of Lewis’ correspondence, from which to extract glimpses of Lewis, the man. Jack himself would have no patience with what we are about to do. “I have no natural curiosity about private lives,” he wrote to a friend (2:980) and to another, “. . .we begin thinking about the private life of the actors when the play ceases to grip us” (3:877).

But most of us *do* have a natural curiosity—don’t we?-- about private lives, especially about the life of someone like C.S. Lewis, who could write books as varied as *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *A Space Trilogy*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a man who through his writing could spar with intellectuals—even in Latin--and stir the imagination of children, always with grace and humor.

In this paper we will extract from those letters what Lewis LOVED, what he HATED, what he FEARED, what he REGRETTED and what he DIDN’T UNDERSTAND.

But let’s start with his own descriptions of himself. To a Miss Coffey, who had asked for a picture of him, “Sorry, but I’m out of photos. Which is perhaps just as well, for I look awful. Imagine a marsh-wiggle gone fat and red in the face. And deaf and bald. I talk far too loud.” (3:1429-30) He called himself and his brother Warnie “two crusted old batchelors (3:394), “old square-rigged type(s)” (2:350), and “quiet ruminants” (2:368). Yet he was always young at heart. To a 12-year old he wrote, “Parts of me are still 12 and I think other parts of me were already 50 when I was 12. . .” (3:362).

In his own words, what did he do well and what did he do badly? He wrote a child, “I am amused you should think ‘my hand must be good at making things’. In reality I’m the clumsiest and most ham-handed person in the world! I can’t *make* anything—words are the only tools I am any good at” (3:1424). He never learned to drive or type: “I’m no good at any sort of machine” (3:615). He couldn’t tie knots (3:1193). A missing joint in each thumb made him “unhandy and

messy” (3:4). To a Miss Mathews, he mourned, “If Man is defined as a tool-using animal, I am not human” (2:981).

LEWIS LOVED:

Books: “My dear Arthur,” Jack wrote his friend Arthur Greeves when he was 16, “Do you ever wake up in the morning and suddenly wonder why you have not bought such-and-such a book long ago, and then decided that life without it will be quite unbearable? I do frequently. .” (2:94).

Jack’s letters to Arthur (as Jack says of Arthur’s letters to him) are “full of enthusiasm about books and music and scenery” (1:287). They read like an annotated bibliography of the *Great Books*. Jack must have read at least a book a day--in English, French, German, Latin, Greek, Italian, Old French and Old English. He considered “re-reading old favourites” one of his greatest pleasures: “indeed I can’t imagine a man really enjoying a book and reading it only once” (2:54). Authors he re-read included Milton, Spenser, Malory, Dante, Austen, Wordsworth, and George Macdonald.

Years later, an author himself, he wrote his publisher that he did not “have for the bodies of my own books the same reverence I have for the bodies of all other books. For it is a curious fact that I never can regard them as being really *books*: the boards and print, in however mint a condition, remain a mere pretence behind which one sees the scratchy, inky old MS [manuscript]” (3:546).

Seasons: Jack often describes the weather in his letters: The beginning of winter “always excites me; it makes me want adventures” (3:659). He notes winter afternoons “when the sky is the colour of putty and the rain comes down in sheets for hour after hour” (1:247).

Early spring is “that thin, tingling, virginal weather” (2:181).

As for summer: “I am not and never will be a hot weather man—having been reared in the north of Ireland, by the sea, where fifty degrees is a cold day, and seventy a very hot one” (3:32-3). He informs an American, “If you have any friends who think of coming over, tell them that the English summer generally falls in the third week in June.” (3:15)

Autumn was his “favourite:” “Anyone else may have all my summers if they’ll give me their autumns. . .” (2:980) “Everything horrid that ever happened to me was in an August. But courage! Divine September, the grey mornings, the beady cobwebs, the delicious hint of frost in the evening, is at hand” (2:875). In autumn, the pond is “sprinkled, or rather *paved* with bright leaves” (2:128).

Nature, scenery: Jack took at least two “walking tours” per year, which were planned rambles or hikes with a few friends through country and town, feasting at a pub on “bread & cheese, beer, and a following cup of tea,” perhaps spending a night or two at tucked-away inns. His descriptions of these, which go on for pages, exude pleasure: “We drank tea at the tiny hamlet of Stoke Pero where there is a little grey church without a tower that holds only about twenty people. Here, according to an excellent custom of our walks, one of the party read us a chapter of

Scripture from the lectern while the rest of us sat heavily in the pews and spread out our mackintoshes to let the linings steam off. . . Best of all was after tea when we struck inland again over the moor in one of those golden evening lights that pours a dreamlike *mildness* over the world: light seemed to be a liquid that you could drink. . . We had done well over twenty miles and felt immortal” (1:895).

Ireland: “I was with a friend in Donegal which is a v. fine, wild country with green mountains, rich secretive valleys, and Atlantic breakers on innumerable desolate sands. But alas!, they get less desolate every year and it will soon be just a holiday resort like so many other places. (One always disapproves of all holiday-makers except oneself!)” (3:797)

“Bathing” (swimming): Until his physical ailments prevented it, Jack swam daily, sometimes naked, in ponds: “I wish you could join me as I board the punt in the before-breakfast solitude and push out from under the dark shadow of the trees onto the full glare of the open water, usually sending the moor hens and their chicks scudding away into the reeds. . . with a delicious flurry of silver drops. Then I tie up to the projecting stump in the middle and dive off the stern of the punt” (1:963) Or in the ocean as it “knock(s) one head over heels in great green, ginger-beer-coloured waves” (2:969). He also liked bathing in the tub. As he wrote his delighted goddaughter: “I like getting down like a Hippo with only my nostrils out” (3:407).

Animals: Jack usually wrote about animals only to children and although his household at the Kilns had, at various times, dogs, cats, hens, geese, rabbits, hamsters, and a white rat this is one of his few references to the pets: “Our (Siamese cat) adores me because I lift her up by her tail—an operation which I can’t imagine I should like if I were a cat, but she comes back for more and more, purring all the time” (3:1044) More often he mentioned wild animals in the surrounding woods. He describes to his godchildren a wild rabbit yawning “a very bored triangular yawn in the middle of a long hot afternoon” (2:819) and a hedgehog which came into the kitchen, drank a saucer of milk and then “got *into* the saucer and settled down to sleep” (2:751)

Convalescence: “Unless it is (a) very painful or oppressive [sic] illness I always get some pleasure out of ‘keeping my bed.’ Especially if you are sick enough to have a fire! There is something beautifully cosy about meals brought up on a tray. . . I love to pile up my pillows, call for a choice pile of bright volumes and settle down to an endless read: if there be snow falling so much the better.” (1:293)

Writing fiction: “I enjoy writing fiction more than writing anything else. Wouldn’t anyone?” (3:1214)

LEWIS HATED:

Correspondence: “(I)t is just when one would be most ready for a talk in the odd hour of the day when one shoves ones work from one and lights the pipe of peace, that one is least ready to sit down and write a letter,” Jack complained to his father in early 1921. “I often wonder how the born letter writers whose ‘works’ fill volumes, overcame this difficulty” (1:518). Perhaps they did not, as Jack did, take it upon themselves to personally answer every letter they received—by hand, preferably with a pen which had to be frequently dipped in ink—even after he developed rheumatism and struggled to write legibly.

He called correspondence “the chief burden of my life” (3:1023), “very laborious” (3:1043), “the ghastly, daily grind” (3:1123), “the bane of my life!” (3:1297). “Yes,” he wrote one lady, “I have many other correspondents: some, alas, lunatics!” (3:581)

In 1949 he fusses to fellow author Dorothy Sayers, “Oh the mails: every bore in two continents seems to think I *like* getting letters. One’s real friends are precisely the people one never gets time to write to” (2:1014). He dreaded Christmas time, when mail was delivered every half-hour. Yet he dutifully answered every letter and card during what he termed (1959) “that utterly galley-slave hour or so every day” before breakfast (3:1076).

Exceptions: “*No* author minds having to answer letters in praise of his own book” (3:447). “But fan mail from children is delightful. . . They want to know whether Aslan repaired Tumnus’s furniture for him. Lovely” (3:65).

Cities: “How horrid all great cities are for more than a fortnight!” (3:907).

Newspapers: “I never read the papers,” (3:63) but “Warnie in his usual way of encouragement, reads me paragraphs. . . at breakfast about liners wind bound in the Mersey and waves 6-1/2 feet high off the Irish coast.” (3:102).

Modern novelists (such as Graham Greene) and poets (Dylan Thomas, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot): “Why should one read authors one does’nt like because they happen to be alive at the same time as oneself?” (3:83)

TV: “(W)e have’nt got a set, and don’t propose to get one; it is I think a very bad habit to develop” (3:350).

Movies: “I have actually been to the films to-day!—to see *Cavalcade!*!” Jack wrote Arthur in 1933. “This is one of the most disgraceful confessions I have ever made to you. . . There is not an idea in the whole thing from beginning to end: it is a mere brutal assault on one’s emotions. . . I have come away feeling as if I had been at a debauch” (2:114-5).

In 1951, he summed up film as “an astonishingly ugly art. I don’t mean ‘ugly’ in any high flying moral or spiritual sense, but just disagreeable to the eye—crowded, unrestful, inharmonious” (3:105).

As far as we can tell from his letters, the only movies Jack had ever seen besides *Cavalcade* were *Snow White* and *Bambi*! He critiqued these as he critiqued everything. Of *Snow White*, he wrote a long paragraph, conceding, “[A]ll the terrifying bits were good, and the animals really most moving; and the use of shadows (of dwarfs and vultures) was real genius. . .” (2:242) Of *Bambi*, he admitted being impressed by the “loveliness” of an American autumn on the screen (2:884).

In response to the suggestion that he allow the Narnian stories to be filmed: “Aslan is a divine figure, and anything remotely approaching the comic (above all anything in the Disney line) would be to me simple blasphemy” (3:491). To one young fan, he explained, “The whole Narnian story is about Christ. That is to say, I asked myself ‘Supposing there really were a world like Narnia, and supposing it had (like our world) gone wrong, and supposing Christ wanted to go into that world and save it (as He did ours) what might have happened?’

“The stories are my answer. Since Narnia is a world of Talking Beasts, I thought He would become a Talking Beast there, as he became a Man here. I pictured Him becoming a lion there because (a) The lion is supposed to be the King of beasts: (b) Christ is called ‘The Lion of Judah’ in the Bible: (c) I’d been having strange dreams about lions when I began writing the books” (3:1244-5).

But is there anyone who loves “the Narnian story” with its Christ-figure Aslan (which means “lion” in Turkish: “I chose it for the sound” (3:519).) who doubts that C.S. Lewis would have thoroughly approved of what Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media have done with *The Chronicles* so far?

He chose not to attend Queen Elizabeth’s coronation in 1953: “I approve of all that sort of thing immensely and I was deeply moved by all I heard of it; but I’m not a man for crowds and Best Clothes” (3:340). He *did* attend the Queen’s garden party in 1956. “Croquet is not mentioned in the invitation,” he wrote Ruth Pitter, “but I am well-read enough to know that a royal garden party will involve hedgehogs, flamingoes, soldiers, Headsman, and the grin of a Cheshire cat.” He reported afterwards, “I learn from the papers that I was one of 8,000 guests and also that the Queen was present, a fact of which I had no evidence from my own experience. . . (T)he crowd round the refreshment tables was reminiscent of Liverpool Street Station on an August bank holiday. . . In a word, it was simply ghastly. Two pints at the little pub on Praed St. were necessary afterwards.” (3:769, 771).

Change: “I would like everything to be immemorial—to have the same old horizons, the same garden, the same smells and sounds, always there, changeless. . . I suppose all these changes shd. prepare us for the far greater change which has drawn nearer even since I began this letter” (3:1383).

Velvet: I can’t enjoy *velvet* as a sound, lovely though it is, because I hate the stuff” (3:1440). He also disliked politics, biographies, and being alone (3:1431).

Americans: In 1916 he wrote, “What a pity such a genius (Nathanael Hawthorne) should be a beastly American!” (1:259) and in 1917 he described “Yanks” as “a set of squatters and damned

money grubbing puritans” (1:266). In 1933 he still looked down on Americans: “I am . . . supervising a young woman who is writing a thesis on G(eorge) MacDonald. . . The girl is, unfortunately, quite unworthy of her subject: apart from everything else, she is an American” (2:96-7).

He would have been shocked to know he would someday marry one!

HE FEARED: “(P)overty frightens me more than anything else except large spiders and the tops of cliffs.” (3:359)

HE DID NOT UNDERSTAND:

Mathematics: “I am also bad at Maths. . .I get muddled over my change in shops.” (3:882)

Economics: “I am very ignorant of the ways of ‘big business’. . . We are as frightened of (a recession) as you, for apparently—for reasons I can’t follow—a recession in America will automatically reproduce the same conditions over here.” (3:906)

Housecleaning: To writer Ruth Pitter: “I didn’t know arm chairs were ever cleaned: should they be?” (3:101)

HE REGRETTED: “I treated my own father abominably and no sin in my whole life now seems to be so serious” (3:445).

HE WAS DISAPPOINTED that *The Screwtape Letters* became so popular: “On my own view *Perelandra* is worth 20 *Screwtapes*” (3:627). His favorite, besides *Perelandra*, was *Till We Have Faces*: “I think it far and away my best book but it has, with the critics and the public, been my one great failure: an absolute ‘flop’. No one seems to have the slightest idea what I’m getting at in it” (3:1148).

At the end of Volume 1, Jack has a new love which will color everything he does and writes the rest of his life: “I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ,” he writes Arthur (1:974). “My puzzle was the whole doctrine of Redemption,” of one man’s death effectively providing salvation for others through “something . . . very mysterious expressed in those phrases I have so often ridiculed (‘propitiation’ – ‘sacrifice’—‘the blood of the Lamb’)” (1:976).

Jack described how he, with friends J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, spent most of one night in September walking the grounds of Magdalene College, Oxford, discussing (among other things) “metaphor and myth” (1:970).

“Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn’t mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself. . . I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it

anywhere *except* in the Gospels. . . Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*. . . (1:976-7)

During his transition to Christianity, Jack looked back with “humiliation” at the letters he had written Arthur, recognizing in them “priggery” and “affectation”: “I seem to be posturing and showing off in every letter” (1:973). Of his thoughts, “one out of every three is a thought of self-admiration. . . I pretend I am carefully thinking out what to say to the next pupil (for *his* good, of course) and then suddenly realise I am really thinking how frightfully clever I’m going to be and how he will admire me. . .” (1:878) “You have no idea how much of my time I spend just *hating* people whom I disagree with—tho’ I know them only from their books—and inventing conversations in which I score off them” (2:125-6).

His conversion brings about other humbling insights about himself. In one letter, he identified with Arthur, who had apparently had a manuscript rejected: “The side of me which longs . . . to be approved as a writer, is not the side of us that is really worth much. . . I would have given almost *anything*—I shudder to think what I would have given if I had been allowed—to be a successful writer. . . I think the only thing for you to do is absolutely to *kill* the part of you that wants success” (1:924-7).

One of his most poignant letters shares his own struggles before he was hired as don (tutor) at Magdalen College, Oxford University. To his godson Laurence Harwood, who had just failed the preliminary exam for entrance to the university, Jack wrote in 1953: “I remember only too well what a hopeless oyster to be opened the world seemed at your age. I would have given a good deal to anyone who cd. have assured me that I ever wd. be able to persuade anyone to pay me a living wage for anything I cd. do. Life consisted of applying for jobs which other people got, writing books that no one wd. publish, and giving lectures wh. no one attended. . . Yet the vast majority of us manage to get in somewhere and shake down somehow in the end” (3:353).

Two new loves revived Lewis in the last 13 years of his life (Volume 3). He accepted the invitation from Magdalene College, Cambridge, to assume the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance English, a position created for him (although, ironically, he did not believe in the Renaissance), and he married Joy Davidman Gresham.

Joy came into his life and his letters in December, 1952. She went from being “a guest, asked for one week but staying for three, who talks from morning till night” (3:268), to “a visitor . . . very nice but one can’t feel quite free” (3:285), to “a lady from New York” (3:394) to “our queer, Jewish, ex-Communist, American convert. . . at any rate, *not* a Bore” (3:450).

During that time his attitude toward America softened, probably without his realizing it. For the first time he expressed interest in visiting the country. As he wrote another American lady, “How wrong you are when you think that streamlined planes and trains wd. attract me to America. What I want to see there is yourself and 3 or 4 other good friends, after New England, the Rip Van Winkle Mts., Nantucket, the Huckleberry Finn country, the Rockies, Yellowstone Park, and a sub-Artic [sic] winter. And I shd. never come if I couldn’t manage to come by sea instead of air: preferably on a cargo boat that took weeks on the voyage. I’m a rustic animal and

a maritime animal: no good at great cities, big hotels, or all that. . .” As a postscript, he added, “I’d love to see a bear, a snow-shoe, and a real forest” (3:377) He never did travel to the States.

But he still didn’t realize he was falling in love with an American. On August 1, 1953, Jack wrote Mary Willis Shelburne, “I do most heartily agree that it is just as well to be past the age when one expects or desires to attract the other sex.” (3:352). Three years later she was the second correspondent to whom he confided (with no intervening mention of Joy, love, courtship, or marriage in his responses to her frequent letters), “I may soon be, in rapid succession, a bridegroom and a widower” (3:808).

Even after the wedding in December, 1956 he referred to Joy as a lady who is very ill, too probably dying” (3:825), “a lady suffering from cancer” (3:826), and finally, after five months, “my wife” (3:830).

During Joy’s remission Lewis wrote to Dorothy Sayers, “We soon learn to love what we know we must lose. . . My heart is breaking and I was never so happy before” (3:862) and a week later, “The house ripples with laughter and esoteric jokes. . . O God, if there were no such thing as the Future!” (3:864)

After her death in July, 1960, he called her “my dear Joy” (3:1170) and “the great love of my life.” (3:1223)

Cambridge University, anticipated: “I think I shall like Magdalene better than Magdalen. It’s a tiny college (a perfect cameo architecturally) and they’re so old fashioned, & pious, & gentle and conservative—unlike this leftist, atheist, cynical, hard-boiled, huge Magdalen. Perhaps from being the fogey and ‘old woman’ here I shall become the *enfant terrible* there” (3:521).

Cambridge University, honeymoon period: “. . . (I)t is so small that I feel I’d like to take it to bed with me or have it swimming in my bath!” (3:600)

Cambridge University, 18 months later: “(M)y medieval mission at Cambridge is, so far, a *flop d’estime*. A few dons come to my lectures but far fewer undergrads. I’ve never had such small audiences before. Must be frightfully good for me” (3:793).

If pride was his “besetting sin” in the first third of his life, humility characterized the last two-thirds. To an American who wrote glowingly of both his and Tolkien’s works, he responded, “Oh, but believe me, you are still only paddling in the glorious sea of Tolkien. Go on from *The Hobbit* at once to *The Lord of the Rings*. . .” while thanking him “for all the nice things you say about my own little efforts.” (3:980-1) He wrote one fan, “I’m so glad you liked my amateurish little book on the Psalms.” (3:1017) and in telling a child about his newest book, *The Silver Chair*, he warned, “Don’t look forward to it too much or you are sure to be disappointed” (3:310).

To a priest: “Yes, God has been v. good to me and allowed my work to reach more people than I would have dared to hope. But I always remember that He can preach thro’ *any* instrument—Balaam’s ass is the example I keep in mind.” He has an asterisk after “Balaam’s ass” and adds a footnote, “Can’t you get it canonised?” (3:1387)

In August, 1963, Jack had a heart attack and was thought to be dying but (according to his brother) he regained consciousness “and asked for his tea.” Home again, he wrote a friend, “It seems almost a pity, having reached the gate so easily, not to be allowed through. . .” (3:1452)

Three months later, on November 22, he *was* “allowed through.” His last letter, written the day before, was to a child: “Thank you for telling me that you like my books, a thing an author is always pleased to hear. It is a funny thing that all the children who have written to me see at once who Aslan is, and grown ups *never* do!” (3:1483)

end