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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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C. S. Lewis:

An Overlooked 1963 Monograph by Roger Lancelyn Green

William O'Flaherty

***C.S. Lewis:* An Overlooked 1963 Monograph by Roger Lancelyn Green**

William O'Flaherty

The first full-length (and authorized) biography of Lewis was published in 1974. One of its authors was Roger Lancelyn Green. Few are aware of (or have even seen) a monograph he wrote before Lewis's death about Jack's life and writings. While Jack saw and approved of the manuscript in 1960 it wasn't released until the same year he died. The purpose of this paper is to review what Green presented in this work and why it should not be neglected.

Books about C.S. Lewis have come and gone over the years. After reading some you may have asked yourself why the author bothered to even have it published. All writers wish their work will have some historical significance. Yet, the impact of some books (or even people) may not be known until many years later. And then, sadly sometimes such positive impact is overshadowed when more recent contributions occur. Take an example from the realm of science. Newton is still respected for his work, but when the average person is asked to name a genius it is the name of Einstein that falls from their lips.

Even during C.S. Lewis's lifetime he experienced this phenomenon regarding his writings. *The Problem of Pain* (1940) opened doors for Jack, but when compared to the impact of *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) its significance appears minor. *The Atlantic Monthly* (in September, 1946) published an article by

Chad Walsh where Jack was declared "Apostle to the Skeptics." But then a year later (on September 8, 1947) Lewis graced the cover of *Time* magazine and today few people are aware of the former achievement. Yet it was the Walsh article that led to the first book in May 1949 about Jack's life and work. All this was then completely eclipsed (at least in the public's mind) by the creation of the Narnia books.

All this is related to my topic because the memory of Roger Lancelyn Green's monograph from 1963, simply entitled *C.S. Lewis*, is all but forgotten because of other books about Jack since his death that same year. One C.S. Lewis Society that has an exhaustive list of books online by and about him was contacted by the author about the exclusion of Green's book and the email reply insisted that they had it included, stating I must be referring to the 1974 biography by Green and Hooper. I even had three Lewis scholars tell me they had never heard of it before I mentioned it to them. Another who knew of the book told me that ten years ago they were unable to find a copy of it at the Cambridge University Library! Therefore, my proposal is that Green's work is a neglected book that should not be ignored because of its age.

This 1963 monograph is part of what might be considered "first generational" books on Lewis. It and others from the same time period are

obviously not the most comprehensive resources about Jack and his works, but they are useful snapshots of what was known at the time, or at least publically discussed about him and his works. In fact, if you are well read on books about Lewis it would benefit you to try to put out of your mind what you already know to enjoy this and other material from the 1960's.

It's important to note that Green's work is not meant to be a biography (as the 1974 book he co-authored was the first complete one). In fact, as a monograph it is by definition a short book. As you know, typically a monograph is a research or scholarly work on a single, specific topic. Usually an expert in a certain field will write one for others in that same field of study. According to the inside of the book cover *C.S. Lewis* was part of a

"...series of short, critical accounts of the life and work of eminent children's authors. As such they form a useful introduction to the field of children's literature, not only for teachers and librarians, but for everyone interested in children's books."

The remainder of this article will provide an overview of what you can expect to find in Green's 65-page work. But before doing so, it's important to underscore a few additional facts. First, Jack knew about this book. He wrote a letter to Roger on March 23, 1960 stating "Thanks—I shall get my teeth into the monograph with great zest" (Lewis, C. S. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 3*. (Harper Collins, Inc., 2007) p. 1140.). The 1974 Green/Hooper biography says Jack did indeed read the manuscript and afterwards approved of it (Green, Roger and Hooper, Walter *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), p. 8.). Green was a student at Oxford and attended some of Lewis's lectures and later became close friends

with Jack. Lewis even asked Green to become his biographer (Griffin, William *C.S. Lewis: The Authentic Voice*. (Lion Hudson plc, 2005) pp. 302-303). Green was himself an established authority on children's literature. The general public know him for his retelling of Robin Hood in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*.

Finally, it is unfortunately not clear when in 1963 *C.S. Lewis* was released. Communications this author had with the Marion E. Wade Center and Walter Hooper failed to establish the exact date of publication. Because Jack's death is not mentioned in the work it is all but certain that it was at least finished before his passing if not publically released before he died.

The book itself is divided into four chapters with an appendix that list books and articles by Lewis and about him. Chapter one is called "Thulcandra." This is, of course, the name for Earth from his trilogy of science fiction books. It covers twelve pages and provides biographical information on Jack with the intent on providing insight into what influenced his writings.

Green immediately addressed an issue Lewis wrote about in *The Personal Hersey* that a person shouldn't be concerned with an author's life. He states, "In the case of a writer of children's books there is certainly some excuse for curiosity about his own childhood, as about his own literary preferences and how he came to have them."

There is a liberal amount of quotes but no mention is made of the source. However, anyone vaguely familiar with *Surprised by Joy* will notice they are from this autobiography. Even though the quotes are numerous, Green weaves them in seamlessly and appears to provide a good summary of Jack's boyhood and teen years. We learn of "The sure companionship of books" after his mom died. Glimpses of his learning and interests seen in later works, such as *Till We Have Faces, That Hideous Strength,*

Mere Christianity, and Narnia. When Jack began "to think in Greek. That is the great Rubicon to cross in learning any language."

The second chapter, "Perelandra," notes there were various omissions about Jack's life that can be found in *Surprised by Joy*. Then he devotes a couple of paragraphs to the concept of "joy," saying "even to describe the experience is difficult and dangerous."

After this he returns briefly to being more biographical, noting that once Jack was a teacher at Oxford "he proved to be one of the most successful and stimulating tutors of his time." (Which Green knew of firsthand). In short order this chapter of also twelve pages skims through most of the books Jack wrote in the 30's and 40's, while also mentioning the later ones and giving just a passing reference to Narnia. At this time Green admits that the Narnia stories "may be beginning to usurp" the popularity of *The Screwtape Letters*.

Green also acknowledges two sides to Jack. One is the already mentioned "Apostle to the Sceptics," and on the other side he is seen as a "Romancer." This is an expression he admits that Jack didn't care much for. Then Green goes into great detail about the first two books in Jack's science fiction trilogy, calling *Perelandra* "an incomparably more important book."

"Narnia," the third chapter contains the most pages at sixteen. The theme is obvious, but it begins with a quote from *Perelandra* and a few paragraphs later a quote from *That Hideous Strength*. Green then addresses the issue of "sources" Jack might have used or been exposed to that would have influenced certain aspects of the Narnia stories. However he states this is "of little importance." Nevertheless he covers several aspects that could have been borrowed from other myths.

Before going into a summary of all of the Narnia books, he shares quotes

from "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" about how the process of writing them came for Jack, "With me the process is much more like bird-watching than either talking or building...Keep quiet and watch and they will begin joining themselves up."

The final chapter, "Aslan," deals with how Narnia has been received by critics. He also notes that in terms of sales *The Horse and His Boy* was the winner with *The Silver Chair* and *The Magician's Nephew* being next and that "*Prince Caspian* appears to be the least popular." But before the end of this section he states *The Silver Chair* and *The Magician's Nephew* are the stories he considers the best.

The other thing worth highlighting is when Green returns to quoting "On Three Ways of Writing for Children." This time it has to do with the question of Jack's stories being too frightening for children. One of the best parts shares comments from Lewis as he states: "Since it is so likely that they will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage."

Thus, as expected there isn't anything "new" about Lewis that Green covers and it is obviously less detailed than the biography co-authored with Walter Hooper. Yet, it does provide an interesting snapshot of how Lewis was viewed at the end of his career and should therefore not be overlooked.