

# Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

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Volume 10 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Tenth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 60

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6-5-2016

## Patriarchy and P'daitaBird: The Artistic Influence of Albert Lewis

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### Recommended Citation

Hurd, Crystal (2016) "Patriarchy and P'daitaBird: The Artistic Influence of Albert Lewis," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 10 , Article 60.

Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever/vol10/iss1/60](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol10/iss1/60)

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## **Patriarchy and P'daitaBird: The Artistic Influence of Albert Lewis**

by Crystal Hurd

Crystal Hurd is an educator, writer, and poet from Virginia. She is the author of *Thirty Days with C. S. Lewis: A Women's Devotional*, and a contributor for *Women and C. S. Lewis: What His Life and Literature Reveal for Today's Culture*. She has also published in *All Nine Muses*, *Legendarium*, *Mythlore*, *Sehnsucht* and *VII*. She serves as the book review editor for *Sehnsucht*.

Albert Lewis has long been characterized as a failed parent by Lewis enthusiasts. He was a staple of Irish politics at the turn of the century, serving as a court solicitor in Belfast, yet his two sons noted that he was often absent and when present, nearly intolerable. However, a closer examination offered in the unpublished *Lewis Papers* presents a different portrait of Albert Lewis. Albert was a reigning hero of the Belfast Conservative party, and was poised to become a successful politician. He was a lover of literature, filling Little Lea to the brim with books. His political speeches often alluded to various literary works, and he was a member of distinguished literary societies. Perhaps most notable is the surprising literary influence that Albert had on his two sons, Warren, who would become an authority on 17<sup>th</sup> century French history, and C.S. "Jack" Lewis, the celebrated literary critic, novelist, children's author, and imaginative apologist.

It is perhaps easy to interpret Albert Lewis as an unflattering character. Most literature, including Lewis's own writings concerning his father, portrays a man with a rigid adherence to routine, an unflinching enthusiasm for argument, and a keen talent of suffocating his listener with verbosity. Albert rarely accompanied his family to the Irish coast, where his sons experienced the beauty of the Irish sea. When he did visit, he seemed restless:

He would sometimes come down for the week-end, but he never stayed with his wife and children throughout the summer holiday. Urgent business was his excuse . . . I never met a man more wedded to a dull routine, or less capable of extracting enjoyment from life. A night spent out of his house was a penance to him: a holiday he loathed, having not the faintest conception of how to amuse himself. I can still see him on his occasional visits to the seaside, walking moodily up and down the beach, hands in trouser pockets, eyes on the

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ground, every now and then giving a heartrending yawn and pulling out his watch. (22)

Weeks after the devastating loss of his wife Flora to abdominal cancer in 1908, Albert reenrolled Warnie (and now Jack) into boarding school. The young Lewis felt that this was a painful exile from the sanctuary of Little Lea and the backdrop of a cherished childhood to the exhaustively competitive climate of early education. Jack admits that Wynyard, a boarding school operated by severe Reverend Robert “Oldie” Capron, was an oppressive and dark experience. Although many scholars argue that Albert’s academic selection demonstrated his stubbornness and frugality, it must be mentioned that Albert did not send the boys away without consulting educational agents Messrs. Gabbitas and Thring as to the best academic options for Warnie and Jack (the letters show that Capron dismissed Albert’s letters of inquisition). George Sayer posited that Jack “blamed the English schools for the difficulty he and many of his generation had in understanding their parents” (*Jack* 74). At the time, Albert was assured that the school would properly prepare the boys for university entrance exams. However, many men of Lewis’s generation struggled to connect with their fathers. In his new biography of Charles Williams, Grevel Lindop quotes a letter from Williams in which he admits that he was “losing his former closeness to his father”: “I could show you, I think, the very point in St. Albans where, just as I was posting a letter, it occurred to me that when my father said X I despised it, and when any one of my friends said X I thought it was extremely intelligent. It is in our blood; we are furious with our parents before we know it” (23).

Indeed, *Surprised by Joy*, although it seems to indict Albert as a problematic parent, illustrated a father struggling to connect with the family that remains. Jack admits that Albert desired the company of his sons, although he became an “oppressive” presence. Lewis recalls that they resembled three brothers other than a father and two sons. He often wished to please his boys, quoting, “Liberty Hall, boys, Liberty Hall” and inquiring what time they would like to eat lunch. However, both boys knew that meals, like many aspects of their day, were subject to their father’s strenuous obedience to routine. Lewis writes, “I should be worse than a dog if I blamed my lonely father for thus desiring the friendship of his sons; or even if the miserable return I made him did not to this day lie heavy on my conscience. . . . I could not ‘be myself’ while he was at home. God forgive me, I thought Monday morning, when he went back to his work, the brightest jewel in the week” (125-126).

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Also noted is Albert's absence before Jack's deployment to France and during his wartime convalescence. Jack desired to see his father before being sent to the French frontlines. However, Albert did not comprehend the telegram and requested clarification. Due to Jack's brief leave, the meeting never occurred. Later, after being wounded in battle, Jack wrote a long, emphatic letter begging for a visit from Albert. However, Albert was preoccupied with work and could not spare time to visit his injured son. Jack interpreted this as a confirmation of Albert's apathy and abandonment, further creating distance between them. Although Albert financed Jack's three firsts at Oxford, his son remained emotionally estranged.

It was during Jack's studies at Oxford that Albert was diagnosed with cancer in August 1929. The younger Lewis returned home to attend the bedside of his ailing father. In a letter to Owen Barfield from *The Collected Letters* dated September 9, 1929, he expressed his deep discontent of nursing a man who, to him, was more a stranger than a beloved father:

As for my present situation, it frightens me for what it implies. I argue thus: 1. I am attending at the almost painless sickbed of one for whom I have little affection and whose society has for many years given me much discomfort and no pleasure . . . My father and I are physical counterparts: and during these days more than ever I notice his resemblance to me. (*Letters* 1:819)

Shortly after composing this letter, Jack left to return to Oxford with a doctor's assurance that Albert's condition would take "years" of atrophy before resulting in death. With this news, Jack left to prepare for Michaelmas term, only to receive word that Albert's illness had worsened. He immediately began his return voyage to Belfast, but Albert passed before his youngest son could return to his bedside. With Warnie away in Shanghai, Jack was left to handle the burial arrangements and settling of various financial affairs associated with his father's estate. It was then, sifting through his father's remains mingled with the remnants of his childhood that Jack began to seriously reflect and reconsider Albert's influence.

There is a distinct change of tone in Jack's correspondence just days after Albert's death. Lewis assumed that his grief was a natural progression in the process of mourning, but found that from this ostensible sadness sprung a genuine affection for the father he thought he knew. On October 17, 1929, he wrote Warnie:

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What you say in your letter is [very] much what I am finding myself. I always before condemned as sentimentalists and hypocrites the people whose view of the dead was so different from the view they held of the same people living. Now one finds out that it is a natural process. Of course, on the spot, one's feelings were in some ways different. I think the mere pity for the poor old chap and for the life he had led really surmounted everything else. It was also (in the midst of home surroundings) almost impossible to believe. A dozen times while I was making the funeral arrangements I found myself mentally jotting down some episode or other to tell him: and what simply got me between wind and water was going into Robinson and Cleaver's to get a black tie and suddenly realizing 'You can never put anything down to his account again'. . . . As time goes on the thing that emerges is that, whatever else he was, he was a terrific *personality*. . . . How he filled a room! How hard it was to realize that physically he was not a very big man. Our whole world, the whole Pigiebotian\* world, is either direct or indirect testimony to the same effect. Take away from our conversation all that is imitation or parody . . . of his, and how little is left. (*Letters* 1:827) [\**Editor's Note: "Pigiebotian" is an in-joke word between the Lewis brothers that refers to a pet name (Piggiebottoms) given to them by a housekeeper in their youth.*]

Warnie expressed similar impressions on the death of his father as recorded in *Brothers and Friends*. After returning from Shanghai, Warnie felt that Little Lea was now dark and empty:

There was a chill about the rank untended garden, but inside at first, the house . . . it's lifelessness: silent it has of course been for many years during most of the day, but this was something new and horrible. It brought home to me as nothing else could have done, the tremendous personality of the Pudaitabird—the whole place is as blank as a frame from which a picture has been stripped. (47)

Perhaps both brothers were realizing that they had been severe on their father. Although both sons admitted to feeling suffocated by his presence and irritated by his idiosyncrasies, what remained in the vacuum of Albert's absence was not relief, but instead a tremendous grief. Others did not interpret Albert as insufferably arrogant but rather as a vibrant, intelligent, and humorous individual. This is especially illustrated through Albert's epitaph published in *St. Mark's Parish Magazine* for the late solicitor:

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The threshold of Little Lea was a kind of parable. Only the few and privileged ventured near and crossed it. But once over, the difficulty was to get away. For the width and wisdom and bubbling fun, and his rage of reading and his human touch, made it one continuous privilege and delight to be in the company of Mr. A.J. Lewis. . . . And with his passing, few of that first generation now remain. Now he crosses the mysterious threshold of the other world. Loneliness ends. Tangles are unraveled. There is fullness of joy in that presence “who to know is to love.” (*The Lewis Papers* 2: 63)

Some suggest that Albert’s death was the impetus for both Jack and Warnie’s religious conversions. George Sayer writes that Albert’s death and Jack’s resulting grief and remorse were the catalyst for a transformation that would shortly after produce the “most reluctant convert in all England”:

Albert’s death affected Jack profoundly. He could no longer be in rebellion against the political churchgoing that was part of his father’s way of life. He felt bitterly ashamed of the way he had deceived and denigrated his father in the past, and he determined to do his best to eradicate the weaknesses in his character that had allowed him to do these things. Most importantly, he had a strong feeling that Albert was somehow still alive and helping him. He spoke about this to me and wrote about it to an American correspondent named Vera Matthews. His strong feeling of Albert’s presence created or reinforced in him a belief in personal immortality and also influenced his conduct in times of temptation. These extrasensory experiences helped persuade him to join a Christian church. (*Jack* 133-34)

Certainly Jack felt a pang of guilt when considering his adolescent dismissal of Albert. He had overlooked the aspects of his father that he had genuinely loved and admired. In a letter dated February 3, 1940, Jack wrote to Warnie that he was being kind to older gentlemen in hopes that it would be “accepted as a kind of penance for my many sins against the P’daitabird: the blackest chapter in my life” (*Letters* 2: 340).

Albert’s death left an indelible mark on his sons, but he especially shaped their literary development. Albert was a voracious reader. In *Surprised by Joy*, the youngest Lewis claims that he is a “product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude. . . . Also of endless books” (9). This was due to Albert’s insistence that books not only be present, but positively

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overflowing in the household. It was this fact that Jack recognized and thus dedicated his first work of literary criticism, *An Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* to his father. Later, Jack's work would be imbued with imagination and reason, two seemingly irreconcilable aspects which he would blend seamlessly and beautifully throughout his literary works. Like his father, Jack was exemplary at rhetorical sparring and philosophical musing, as well as inserting humor where it would be most effective.

Few know that Albert was an excellent writer himself, penning short stories and poems in various notebooks around Little Lea. His expansive knowledge of literature is referenced throughout various political speeches written early in his career. However, Albert was disgusted with political corruption and opted instead to become a court solicitor, fighting for the common man. In fact, one of his short stories depicting an impoverished man's misfortune in court, is subtitled "The law's an ass," a phrase borrowed from Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*. Like his son Jack, Albert enjoyed writing poetry. One such example is an untitled piece scribbled in his Common Book of 1889 which mourns the death of Emperor Frederick of Germany:

A few short months of Kingly power  
A few short months of Royal state.  
Glory and woe for one brief house,  
Adored by men, and mocked by fate.

A life too short for patriot plan,  
A life too short for purpose high.  
Yet not too short to teach to man  
How Kings should live and Christians die.

One hero midst the carnage falls  
When shouts proclaim the field is won,  
And one in anguish patient calls,  
'Thy will, not mine, Oh! God, be done.'

Battles and sieges thou hast past  
To make and keep thy people free,  
Yet wilt thy fame such strife outlast,  
Suffering shalt thy memorial be.

Where hearts shall ache for peace and rest  
And death more joy than treasure give,  
Thy name shall comfort and be blessed,  
And God be praised that thou didst live.

(*The Lewis Papers*, 2: 147)

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Writing was most certainly “in the blood.” Jack admits in *Surprised by Joy* that this propensity to write was due to a “physical defect which my brother and I both inherit from our father; we have only one joint in the thumb” (12). Both boys quickly developed into writers.

*Boxen*, the brothers’ childhood stories of anthropomorphic heroes and villains, has a considerable amount of political tangle in it, no doubt gleaned from Albert’s lively discussions of Belfast politics. From an early age, the boys were creating narratives from their father’s professional and political life. Warnie began writing after his retirement from the army, but first took it upon himself to type up the voluminous *Lewis Papers* in order to preserve the family correspondence. This was a way to secure the family legacy, but also to acquaint himself with the father and mother of which he admittedly knew so little. His interest in 17<sup>th</sup> century French history could have easily been influenced by Albert’s political enthusiasm.

Additionally, both Jack and Warnie captured Albert’s anecdotes, affectionately called “wheezees,” in a manuscript titled *Pudaita Pie: An Anthology*. This draft was recently transcribed and appears in the next issue of VII. It includes an introduction by Jack (penned between 1922 and 1924) and includes 100 numerated “wheezees” which reveal the comedic side of their father. Several of these anecdotes appear in *Surprised by Joy*. It is important to note that the manuscript was written *before* Albert’s death, illustrating an affection that both boys shared for their father despite their many objections to his overwhelming personality.

Another gesture of devotion resides at St. Mark’s Dundela Belfast Diocese, where Flora’s father was a rector for many years. Shortly after Albert’s death, Warnie and Jack eventually erected a memorial window for their parents. Like the preservation of *The Lewis Papers*, these windows were tokens of appreciation, and also perhaps of reconciliation, for Albert and Flora.

The portrait of Albert Lewis, as fashioned through reading his speeches as well as his artistic prose and poetry, truly demonstrates a lively character who lived transparently, whose logic and emotions could persuade effectively, and ultimately whose passion and good intentions were unmistakable. In general, biographers have not been kind to Albert, but a deeper investigation reveals a warm and witty man who left an unrelenting influence on his sons.

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