

Essay Review

A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*, Collins, 1990

***'The Red-Faced Ulsterman':
A.N. Wilson on C.S. Lewis***

by JOHN GILLESPIE*

When it was published in 1990, A.N. Wilson's biography of C.S. Lewis received an enthusiastic reception and considerable critical acclaim. It sold well in hardback and was subsequently issued as a paperback. This is testimony not only to the continuing popularity of C.S. Lewis and the absence of a thoroughly researched critical biography about him, but also to the reputation of A.N. Wilson as a novelist and biographer. It probably also had a lot to do with the aspects of Lewis' life on which A.N. Wilson concentrates.

Wilson is correct in observing the extent to which studies of C.S. Lewis have been distorted by the hagiographers. However, although his passages on the opposing camps of Lewis worshippers are amusing and to an extent enlightening, they are simplistic and melodramatic. He is very patronizing towards Wheaton College and somewhat spiteful about Walter Hooper's 'C.S. Lewis industry' (p. 302). Moreover he has forgotten about the distortions of Lewis' detractors. Almost thirty years after his death the name of C.S. Lewis is still capable of stirring considerable controversy, particularly among those with Oxbridge connections. What has been needed is a biography which gives a sympathetic but honest account of Lewis' life and critically assesses his intellectual life and concerns within that context.

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Regrettably, these are tasks that A.N. Wilson has signally failed to perform.

Despite this there are many good things about the book. Wilson, as one might expect, writes very well; he has clearly read almost everything that Lewis ever published, and has researched the Lewis papers and correspondence thoroughly. He has considerable admiration for Lewis' intellect and writings and has been moved by some works in particular. Moreover, having been a fellow at Oxford himself, his account benefits from the knowledge of the insider. His description of the reasons for Lewis not getting the Merton chair of English in 1947 (p. 208), for example, is particularly good, as are his accounts of the jealousy of his academic colleagues. He is also interesting in his presentation of Lewis' neo-platonic approach to Christianity and his lack of concern for the doctrine of justification by faith. However one comes away from reading the biography feeling that one has found out almost as much about A.N. Wilson and his opinions, likes and dislikes as about C.S. Lewis.

Lewis the Ulsterman

For Wilson does not only like and admire Lewis, he also seems to dislike him as well. One feels that in Wilson's eyes one of the main problems is that Lewis is an Irishman and, worse still, an Ulsterman. Although his researches on Lewis' grandparents and parents are interesting and informative, his grasp of Northern Ireland society and politics both then and now seems so shaky as to undermine confidence in his judgement in other areas. One could overlook sentences such as 'What about Campbell College, the best school in Belfast?' when referring to 1904 (the school had only been founded shortly before and was competing with other more established and successful academic institutions) and slips such as 'Island Magee' rather than 'Islandmagee' are merely irritating. But his rather simplistic and stereotyped view of the extremely complex political situation in the province is disturbing. Northern Ireland is characterised solely in terms of a rather melodramatic sectarianism and bigotry.

This stereotyped attitude to the Irish is well illustrated in Wilson's description of the Professor of Poetry contest at Oxford. Lewis is roundly condemned for having backed a candidate and tried to help him win by canvassing vigorously on his behalf, rather than congratulated on his democratic instincts. For Wilson this appears to be 'bad form' which can be easily explained: 'This

was a situation which the Ulsterman in Lewis relished. For the time being, he ceased to be a cloistered academic and became once more the son of the police-court solicitor in Belfast, the city where the most popular political slogan at election times was vote early, vote often' (p. 157). 'In staunch Irish fashion, he laid on transport for Fox's supporters to be bused (sic) into Oxford on the appropriate days and rewarded them for their votes with meals and refreshment at Magdalen' (p. 158).

In Wilson's view this episode destroyed Lewis's chances of promotion. Apart from being an indictment of the pettiness of the academics concerned, it shows that Wilson is not beyond resorting to the same instincts of snobbery, caricature, and racism. Lewis broke the rules. For Wilson, he is politically incorrect, red-faced Ulsterman, coarse, contemptuous of the opposite sex, a heavy smoker who liked a drink. He did not conform to a certain kind of style. Worst of all, he was someone who thought he was right, and indulged in debate with a desire to argue his point vigorously and to win it.

He puts this approach down to the 'bogey of Lewis's Ulster background (which) lurked beneath the surface of his imagination, and rose when he was off his guard to make him brutal in manners, crude or illogical in thought' (p. 136). Further anti-Irish views are suggested by remarks such as 'the Ulster viewpoint' (p. 24); 'the broadest Ulster brogue' (p. 31); 'all his anti-English prejudice' (p. 33); and 'the diminutive French scholar Enid Starkie, a peculiar little Irish woman'. In the same category is the assumption of anti-catholicism: 'Lewis himself would have found it uncomfortable that he had been taken up by the Sovereign Pontiff in Rome' (p. 308) a remark rather out of keeping with views expressed in, for example, *Mere Christianity*. This tendency is what Tolkien referred to as the 'ulterior motive' (p. 136).

Lewis and Mrs Moore

However, although an Irishman may cavil at Wilson's apparent racism, its major effect is to call his judgement in question. By far the most controversial aspect of the book is the charge that Lewis' relationship with Mrs Moore was something more than that of a mother and son relationship and that they had a lengthy secret affair. This claim, if true, should cause a serious re-evaluation of Lewis. However Wilson, instead of dealing with the issue head on and assessing the evidence carefully, indulges in considerable equivocation. Mrs Moore comes to form an important

narrative thread of the biography, yet it is a thread of inconsistent innuendo rather than of evidence, argument and proof.

Wilson concedes that there is a lack of evidence: "It would also be amazing, though no evidence is forthcoming either way, if Lewis' thirty-year relationship with Mrs Moore was entirely asexual" (p. xvi), but refers to Mrs Moore as 'a pretty blonde Irishwoman of forty-five' (p. 52) and then later suggests that a lack of evidence should not stand in the way of his theory: "the burden of proof is on those who believe that Lewis and Mrs Moore were *not* lovers—probably from the summer of 1918 onwards" (p. 59).

Similarly while saying "It is probably fanciful to cast Mrs Moore as Phaedra, or the P'daytabird as Theseus, but now Lewis was crossing the sea to see his father for the last time" (p. 110), he nonetheless continues his narrative as if it were true. And Lewis' conversion is not immune from innuendo: "It would be far too glib to suggest that he consciously made the second change, to adopt Christianity, merely to give himself an excuse to abandon sexual relations with Mrs Moore, whatever the nature of those relations had been" (p. 128). And then later he backtracks in saying: 'the relations he had with her were far more intense than those which most men have with their mothers' (233). When Joy Davidman comes on the scene he sees her "as a Mrs Moore substitute" (p. 256), and at the end he unequivocally states that "he had 2 liaisons with married women" (p. 304).

If there is no evidence, nothing should be said, and if there is, it should be looked at carefully. Why should the burden of proof be on those who will not accept such a view without evidence; and if it is fanciful or glib to characterize their relationship in a certain way, then why mention it at all? Wilson is, in turn, coy, condemnatory, direct, equivocal, question-begging and straightforward, but never produces anything convincing. There may very well be something in what he suggests, but more evidence is required.

The Freudian Lewis

Similarly unsatisfactory in providing us with a guide to Lewis' life is Wilson's amateur Freudian sleuthing. His relationship with Mrs Moore is linked to his theory of "the quest for his lost mother" (p. xi) which is said to dominate his relations with women. This quest is further linked to his depiction of Lewis as a Peter Pan figure: "For there was no children's story more apposite to his life

than that of the little boy who *could* not grow up, and who had to win his immortality by an assertion of metaphysical improbabilities" (p. 26). So, indirectly, Lewis is criticized for his writing of fantasy and the happiness he found in such writing.

Wilson also makes much of the combat of between Lewis and his father (p. 26). Now there is clearly evidence that Lewis behaved badly, and he is surely right to criticize Lewis for his unjust and ungenerous attitudes, but does not succeed in showing that this antipathy came to structure his whole life.

Then there are further allusions to his sexuality, charges of sado-masochism, of bizarre sexual preferences and fantasies (p. 49), and further coat-trailing: "How far Lewis was able to indulge any of his sexual tastes must remain something of a mystery" (p. 58).

Apart from the unsatisfactory nature of his psychology, the biography itself seems to depend on the fallacy of assuming that there is a close relationship between the person and his works and that to understand one needs to know about the other. This rather old-fashioned view of literary biography could easily be cured by a dose of Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, or Lewis' book *The Personal Heresy*, for what is striking is that Wilson's attempts to describe Lewis fail to get to the heart of the man.

Indeed it is clear that Wilson, in concentrating on the more scandalous aspects of Lewis' life, yields to the temptation of treating biography like novel-writing, with narrative plots and climaxes which further seem to distort the work. He is overinfluenced by storytelling and the need for a narrative thread which he finds in his psychological tale of the lost mother/Peter Pan/rejected father/Mrs Moore/Joy Davidman sequence.

To pursue this course he must at times subvert Lewis' account of his life in *Surprised by Joy*. Whatever the justification for his doing so, it is scarcely plausible that his attempt at biography will be more authoritative. This approach means that even the positives of Lewis' conversion have negatives: "Lewis was most happy in Christian garb. There is no doubt that until he discovered this clothing (be it artificial carapace or 'the whole armour of God') Lewis was only half-formed as a writer, as a literary imagination, perhaps as a person" (p. 124).

Lewis and Myth

If Wilson had spent less time on the more gossipy subjects his work would have been more illuminating. He is extremely good in

outlining the importance of myth in Lewis and his belief in true myth. He very accurately draws a line from Lewis' early reading, writing and fantasies as a child to his later enthusiasm for literature and his writing of the trilogy and the Narnia tales, correctly recognizing myth's part in Lewis' conversion and its centrality in his intellect and imagination.

For Wilson, Lewis' greatest achievements are his Narnia tales, on which his current popularity rests, and on his works of literary scholarship. He praises *Allegory of Love*, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century* the Oxford History of English Literature of the Sixteenth Century (excluding drama) and regards *The Discarded Image* as his most impressive book. In this context, the whole course of the relationship between Lewis and Tolkien is sensitively told and Lewis' role in encouraging Tolkien to produce *The Lord of the Rings* is duly acknowledged.

Lewis the Apologist

However he then uses Lewis' love for myth to undermine respect for him as an apologist. According to Wilson, since Lewis came to Christianity through myth he did not, therefore, need intellectual justification (p. 166). Moreover he knew nothing of biblical scholarship. In consequence, since he was not an expert, a theologian, 'his excursion into the realm of religious apologetics' must be viewed with ambivalence (p. 162), (although such considerations do not seem to have prevented Wilson himself from writing on Jesus). He views him as a rhetorical trickster (p. 163). And he takes him to task for not liking the moderns even though it was they, of course, whom Lewis was opposing.

This aspect of his assessment of Lewis is clearly unsatisfactory. Wilson dismisses Lewis' thought without outlining it and certainly without refuting it. In addition, he too readily accepts that G.E.M. Anscombe's skirmish with Lewis at the Socratic Club in 1948 dealt a devastating blow to him at the time and stung him "back into childhood" (p. 220), and that it called in question his whole apologetic enterprise.

In short, Wilson does not give due weight to his apologetics. Whereas many people have first been attracted to his work through these writings, for Wilson they are not truly significant. Although he praises his analysis of Christian behaviour (p. 180), particularly in *Mere Christianity* and the *Abolition of Man*, he totally fails to take proper account of C.S. Lewis' influence other

than by caricaturing the opposing camps of Lewis followers. He seems more concerned about social considerations, being particularly disturbed by Lewis' "unfashionable views", that he was not a follower of Wittgenstein, for instance, as if fashion mattered where truth was concerned.

A.N. Wilson's Theology

We have noted that Wilson himself emerges as one of the focuses of the book. His theological uncertainties certainly show through. He views the New Testament as a collection of old books not unlike the intellectual baggage of the mediaeval intellectual which say nothing clear-cut about the nature of Christ (pp. 164-165). One particular statement is revealing: "Since there is nothing in the universe to suggest that 'rational' explanations of life explain anything, the sceptic or mocker finds as much to disconcert him in the cult of C.S. Lewis as does the troubled believer" (p. 205).

Statements such as this are ironic, since he is expressing it just the kind of intellectual attitude that Lewis so despised and so consistently opposed. They suggest that for all his admiration and respect for many aspects of the man and his work, Wilson has signally failed to get to the intellectual centre of it, a centre which is not only a love of the imagination and of myth but of the conviction that myth became fact and that this belief, far from being a fantasy, is overpoweringly rational. Being unable to share Lewis' robust belief in Christian orthodoxy, possibly even fighting against it, he is unable to present it thoroughly and objectively. It is significant, in the light of his doubts, that he regards Lewis' excellent *A Grief Observed*, his most troubled, doubtling book, as the best thing he wrote (pp. 284, 286).

In 1991, a year after the book was written, A.N. Wilson is said to have lost his faith. In 1992 he published a controversial study of Jesus which has been characterized as a series of educated guesses based on a reread of all the 'liberal' theories of the early part of the century¹. His love for controversy and self-publicity which characterized that and other works, is certainly evident in his study of C.S. Lewis. So is his lack of rigour. As Hunter Davies says "Mr. Wilson has always specialized in glorious generalisations, based on the slimmest of information, which is

1. "Messing about with the Messiah", an interview with William Leith, in *The Independent on Sunday*, 13th September 1992, p. 23.

why his journalism is so enjoyable and his biographies so readable.”²

Wilson’s biography is probably an attempt, as other reviewers have suggested³, to debunk or demythologize Lewis. There is nothing wrong with that. However it is clearly unhelpful to set up an equally (if not more) fanciful countermyth. His biography is well worth reading not merely for the light that it throws on C.S. Lewis, but also as an illustration of a certain kind of biographical writing. It has something of the stamp of the dilettante about it. There is no rigorous intellectual engagement with the whole problem of God, with the question of truth, with literature and with ethical judgements—all questions which constantly preoccupied Lewis. Despite the many good things in it, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* must be judged a failure.

Wilson has shown himself not enough of a literary critic to produce a critical biography, not enough of a psychologist to produce a psychobiography, not enough of a philosopher to critically assess his apologetics, too much of a novelist to resist putting in a narrative thread related to sexual tension and forbidden love and too ill at ease with the Christian faith and its claims to view Lewis’ apologetic efforts in an objective way. The definitive critical biography of C.S. Lewis remains to be written.

2. “In bed with A.N. Wilson,” The Hunter Davies Interview, *The Independent*, 12th January 1993, p. 13.

3. See Anne Loades, “C.S. Lewis, A Biography”, *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 2, June 1992, pp. 211-212; Virginia Stem Owens, “The Demythologized Lewis”, *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, No. 9, June 18th 1990, pp. 43-45; David Porter, “C.S. Lewis”, *Third Way*, Vol. 13, No. 6, July/August 1990, pp.41-42 and Glenn Edward Sadler, “Revering and debunking a saint”, *Reformed Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 9, Nov. 1990, pp. 24-25.