BOOK REVIEWS

**C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet**

Alister McGrath  
xvi + 431 pages, $24.99 hardcover

Reviewed by: Harry Lee Poe

In the fiftieth anniversary year of the death of C. S. Lewis, Alister McGrath has published a new biography of Lewis. Even Lewis devotees might be prone to wonder, “What? Another one? Whatever for?” Lewis has grown into a minor industry that bridges the divide between Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, and Pentecostals, with scores of books published on him just in the years since the release of the first Narnia movie. Is there anything left to write about Lewis? McGrath has proven that quite a lot remained to be written about Lewis.

In many ways, McGrath does not write like the apostles Matthew and Mark who wrote in ways that assumed their audiences knew and understood the Palestinian, first century, Jewish world of Jesus. McGrath writes more like the apostle John who wrote in a way that assumed his audience knew nothing about the world of Jesus. Like the apostle Luke, McGrath shares his research methodology with his audience along the way, pausing to explain that sometimes what everybody knows simply is not true.

Walter Hooper and Roger Lancelyn Green wrote the earliest full biography of Lewis in 1974, though some earlier, brief treatments of him were written by Green (1969) and Helen Gardiner
Jocelyn Gibb’s edited volume of recollections of Lewis by his friends in 1965 provides insight into Lewis that has helped biographers over the years. Walter Hooper’s early biography was written without the benefit of all of Walter Hooper’s scholarly achievement of the 1970s and 1980s that resulted in the publication of Lewis’ diary and his letters to Arthur Greeves. George Sayer had the benefit of the Greeves letters when he wrote his admirable biography Jack in 1988 as did A. N. Wilson when he published his less admirable C. S. Lewis: A Biography in 1990. None of these, however, had the benefit of the massive three volume edition of Lewis’ letters that Hooper published between 2004 and 2007.

The most sensational aspect of this biography concerns McGrath’s re-dating of Lewis’ conversion to theism. Biographers have long accepted the dating given by Lewis himself in Surprised by Joy. Lewis himself had the same problem with his spiritual autobiography as previous biographers have had. Lewis did not have access to his own letters. He operated purely on memory of events that had taken place twenty five years earlier. In the midst of his spiritual crisis, however, Lewis had written details to his friend Arthur Greeves. Though Lewis never saved any of his correspondence, Greeves saved all of Lewis’ letters, and McGrath had this valuable resource. Others may have pondered the difficulty of reconciling Lewis’ account in 1955 with what he had written in his letters in 1929-1930, but it has taken McGrath to conclude that the two accounts cannot be reconciled. For Lewis devotees, he has uttered the unspeakable heresy: Lewis had his dates wrong. Having settled that Lewis was mortal like the rest of us, McGrath moves on.

When approaching matters of some sensitivity, such as the relationship between Lewis and Mrs. Janie Moore or between Lewis and his father, McGrath has a habit of speaking confidentially to the reader with such comments as a “close reading” or a “sympathetic reading” or the “shrewd reader” will come to a different conclusion than the conventional wisdom. McGrath regards himself as the shrewd reader who stands far enough back from the life of Lewis to bring a fresh look at the man. Except for A. N. Wilson, all of the major biographers of Lewis had known him personally. Wilson had
his own ax to grind, and grind it he did, so McGrath in many ways represents the first biographer who can write of Lewis in a critical, detached way.

McGrath takes his stand on a number of Lewis controversies, including the famous debate with Elizabeth Anscombe. He disagrees with A. N. Wilson and others who contend that Lewis abandoned apologetics after his debate with Anscombe and turned to writing fiction. Wilson argued that this retreat reflected Lewis’ “realization that rational argument cannot support the Christian faith” (254). This view of Wilson ignores the number of essays Lewis wrote until his death and his publication of *Mere Christianity* in 1952. McGrath correctly argues that Lewis did not retreat from reason, but wed reason and imagination as he created the world of Narnia.

Readers will find much to admire and the occasional point to debate with this biographer, but McGrath has made a substantial contribution to the understanding of C. S. Lewis and his contribution to twentieth century Christianity.

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