Asking Lewis for his views on history might seem odd. He was not a historian by training, but a professor of literature and language. Worse, he was a professor of medieval literature and language: a subject known for credulity about historical fact. Worst of all, he became famous for books that are in some ways the opposite of sound histories: fantasy stories for children. However, it’s not as bad as it might appear. Lewis on history does make sense. He was, in fact, deeply invested in the past and, at times, even spoke of himself as an ambassador of a different age. He had a commanding knowledge of the past and his delight in the literature and ideas of earlier times overflowed – a characteristic close to the heart of his scholarship. He was a theologically skilled and dedicated Christian who wrote with an Augustinian understanding of human history as a whole. And he was a beautiful writer. Good writing that is artful, commanding, and true; that’s something special.

A word about history: Most generally, history is a true story about the past that attracts our attention for some reason, usually with the hope of changing things in the present. Memory and hope walk together: the one looks back to the past, the other looks forward to the future; both are essential to historical understanding. “A true story about the past that attracts our attention.” This is a good shoe; it flexes where we need it to flex. For now, let me offer
three points of variability: the level of detail, the meaning, and the presence or absence of professional guidelines.

Sometimes the word “History” refers simply to “the past.” In this sense, “history” includes all of the past, infinite in detail and complex beyond all knowing, almost entirely unrecorded and forgotten. Each moment has its contribution, yet the full past, as Lewis observed, is “a roaring cataract of billions upon billions of such moments: any one of them too complex to grasp in its entirety, and the aggregate beyond all imagination.” Of course nobody tries to tell the entire story. We tell only stories that matter to us. In this sense, history is something people work with every day. Individually and communally, these true stories about the past are important to everything we do, bringing forth associations and memories from our past that are useful but also likely to be partly correct and partly wrong. We use the past constantly, incessantly, to understand and communicate, sort out the true from the false, filter the factual from the invented, and make sense of what our pasts actually mean.

The meaning of the past varies, not only from person to person and community to community, but also age to age. The range of meaning assigned long ago to events differs in important ways from the range of meaning of those same events today. Those events will carry somewhat different meanings for various generations in the future.

Let me make one more distinction. When these efforts to gain the truth about the past intensify and demand material evidence that can be checked for validity, then we have come to the professional history that historians write. This is still a “true story about the past that has attracted our attention,” but the narrative has been limited to interpretations of the material evidence that we can gather, and is separated from other, less factual forms of true stories, such as novels, drama, and poetry. Professional history is certainly not where people begin, but instead is one place people arrive if their lives and communities demand an accounting of events.

Lewis wrote an enormous range of materials: academic writing, poetry, fiction, apologetics, theology, philosophy, and
thousands of pages of letters. Sometimes he wrote professional literary history and criticism. Other times he wrote in more familiar language to a broad audience. However, in both areas of writing, he communicated his historical understanding. In other words, we’re not limited to the scholarly writing; Narnia is fair game, too, especially for the long arc of historical narrative.

Let me offer two observations about Lewis on history. First, Lewis’ literary histories were controversial, bold, and in places transformed his field. Second, Lewis was an advocate for the past, seeking to read earlier writers for who they were, more than for what they contributed to future literature. He sought to reclaim the enchantment of an earlier age, immersing readers in the medieval imagination for its own sake, and yet he was simultaneously aware that the virtues of an earlier age can enhance the present. Sometimes, he even argued, the past must unhorse, or overthrow, the present.

THE LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORIES

Lewis is, in fact, acclaimed for his historical contributions, especially to literary history and intellectual history. He was Professor of English literature first at Oxford University (1925-54) and then at Cambridge (1954-63), where he was the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature. His professional scholarship focused on late medieval English literature and included four scholarly books, all of which were well received: *The Allegory of Love* (1936), *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1941), *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (1954), and *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (1964). Two in particular were important: *The Allegory of Love* and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*.

*The Allegory of Love* is a study of allegory and love poetry as it developed in Western Europe (especially France and Italy), up to seventeenth century England. As Lewis’ first scholarly book, it established his reputation as an innovative scholar and an artful writer. Alan Jacobs observed that “even before it was published, scholars who had read it in draft begged Lewis to write a volume in the ongoing *Oxford History of English Literature*.” Lewis argued
for the central place of the allegorical literature of courtly love in medieval culture and offered “fresh and illuminating” assessment of virtually every author he mentions. His chapter on Chaucer was transformative and still shapes Chaucer studies today. Even booksellers noted that sales of medieval works increased in the wake of Lewis’ book. Biographer George Sayers observes: “On the strength of *The Allegory of Love* and of his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, there can be no doubt of his greatness as a literary historian.”

One example: To open the chapter on Chaucer in *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis compares modern literary historians to the first readers of Chaucer:

> For many historians of literature, and for all general readers, the great mass of Chaucer’s work is simply a background to the *Canterbury Tales*, and the whole output of the fourteenth century is simply a background to Chaucer. . . . When the men of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries thought of Chaucer, they did not think first of the *Canterbury Tales*. Their Chaucer was the Chaucer of dream and allegory, of love-romance and erotic debate, of high style and profitable doctrine. . . . To grow impatient with the critical tradition of the earliest lovers of Chaucer is to exclude ourselves from any understanding of the later Middle Ages in England; for the literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is based (naturally enough) not on our reading of Chaucer, but on theirs. And there is something to be said for them.

In short, Lewis recontextualized Chaucer studies. This reflects one of Lewis’ constant aims as a literary historian: to read earlier generations in their own voice and then offer to us what that generation found to be good and true and beautiful.

His other great contribution was *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*. One of the problems in the scholarly study of that age is to explain the extraordinary burst of
creativity of the late 1500s, exemplified best by Spenser and Shakespeare. Spenser published the first half of *Faerie Queen* in 1590; Shakespeare started his theater career in the mid-1580s. Before that, most English literature was, as Lewis calls it, “Drab.” The standard explanation of Lewis’ day credited the humanists with lighting the fuse. Lewis reversed that conclusion, arguing that the humanists could not possibly have inspired the rejuvenation of English literature. They were far too pedantic, imitative, and rules-bound. “Whatever else humanism is,” Lewis argued, “it is emphatically not a movement towards freedom and expansion.” Again, his conclusions inspired debate and a rethinking of the field as a whole.

A few things stand out. First, Lewis was unusually gifted with the languages of the classical and medieval ages. He was not only philosophically astute, but he also had an affinity with the philosophy of an earlier age. These personal connections with an earlier age were unique and allowed him to participate in the continuity between Medieval and Renaissance literature, not merely argue for it. When he claimed to be a “specimen” of the Old Western order, he wasn’t that far off. As Donald Williams put it, “This background gave him a perspective on the literature of the Renaissance perhaps unmatched by any modern scholar.”

Second, Lewis was highly skilled at finding commonalities between disparate writers and ideas: puritans and humanists, magicians and astrologers, John Milton and Beatrix Potter. He synthesized ideas very well.

Third, Alan Jacobs argued that what set him apart most was his capacity to be enchanted. His delight, his love of story, and his ability to communicate that delight are rare qualities among scholars.

Fourth, he was intellectually combative and competitive; he knew how to lead and wanted to lead. This was mixed with deep empathy for others; he understood mercy and generosity.

Finally, he was an artful, engaging writer. Lewis had a gift for writing that remains winning, rather than pedantic, engaging rather than stultifying, humbling yet delightful. His knowledge, skill, and personality are on full display in his academic prose, perhaps more so here than in any other area of his writing. His
writing is pointed, self-assured, sometimes witty, occasionally over the top rather than perfectly balanced. On the first page of *English Literature*: he criticizes the literature of the early 16th century as “ruthless . . . bludgeon-work. Nothing is light, or tender, or fresh. All the authors write like elderly men.” The imagery alone is worth the price of admission.

SOMETIMES THE PAST MUST UNHORSE THE PRESENT
Memory and hope work together, as noted above. We use stories from the past to make decisions in the present that hopefully will benefit us in the future. It’s as natural as breathing. We inhale the past, filter out some of the oxygen, and exhale the rest. The causal connections between past, present and future are elusive and complex beyond our knowing, but foundational to understanding. When we want to understand our current problems, identities, and opportunities, we look to the past.

Characters in Narnia regularly tell stories from the past to explain the present and guide the future. Aslan tells Lucy and Susan about deep magic from the past so they can understand his response to the White Witch. Jadis reveals her tremendous lust for power to Digory and Polly by telling them about her past use of the “deplorable word.” We could go on, but there’s no need. It’s so normal.

The past that we use is an interpretation; this, too, is part of the landscape. The past doesn’t come to us virginal and innocent, untouched by others. Getting the facts right is just part of it; getting the meaning of the facts right is equally important. Jadis explains her use of the deplorable word as if it were as obvious as cold water on a hot day, but Jill and Eustace are aghast. They interpret her actions very differently. This is important, for interpretation implies the possibility of disagreement and change. Whatever interpretation we agree to today might be overthrown tomorrow and almost certainly will be modified in thirty years.

All of this is preliminary to my argument about Lewis: sometimes the past is more than a guide. Sometimes the past is prophetic and demands change; the present must be challenged and unhorsed, overthrown. An older generation pulls the sword out of the stone
and the fashions and convictions of the present temporarily lay aside their rule.

Obviously Lewis recognized that going back in time is not possible. As he points out in his inaugural address as Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, mere reversal is not possible; post-Christian does not mean a relapse into Pagan. Nonetheless, he loved an earlier age, sometimes saw himself as a capable representative of that age, and sought to challenge or even unseat aspects of contemporary culture.

I will explore two ways in which Lewis expresses this, one from his fiction and one from his non-fiction. In Book 2 of *The Chronicles of Narnia, Prince Caspian*, the usurper Miraz is overthrown with the aid of the four Pevensie children. As part of the overthrow, Aslan arrives, not only to establish Caspian as King, but also to overturn the consequences of misrule. Dogs break their chains, oppressed children are freed, and boring schools turn into forest glades. Among other events, the Bridge at Beruna is torn down by Bacchus, and the Ford of Beruna is reestablished. This is cause for celebration: the river has been freed, and the whole party along with Aslan, swim and splash and dance across the river. It is a "romp" as Dionysus calls it.

Certainly for Lewis this is emblematic of his resistance to present trends and especially the assumption of progress. He was grieved by the industrial advancements, often celebrated in the name of progress, that made possible the pollution, oppression, and carnage of the industrial age. (Remember that he was wounded and lost close friends in WWI, and that his friend Tolkien lost every close friend but one in that war.) Everywhere in Narnia -- and in Tolkien's Middle Earth for that matter -- their grievance is clear: technological advancement means war, factories, dirty rivers, tyrannical masters, decimated forests, fireplaces that don't draw, unjust laws, pasty food, a shortage of pipe weed, and uncomfortable clothes.

The story tells in the other direction, too. Victory over evil has cultural consequences that push back to an earlier, better day. Hobbits and Narnians alike toss aside new rules, tear down new buildings, set free the ossified and oppressed, shed uncomfortable clothes, and turn bridges into fords. More subtly, life returns to
being “a festival, not a machine.” The revitalization is apparent in the Narnia stories, especially *Prince Caspian*, but that description of life as “a festival, not a machine” doesn’t come from his fiction; it comes from his scholarship, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*.

Lewis’ non-fiction happily sends readers back to pre-industrial lives and literature. He advises audiences to read old books. He refers to himself as a “specimen” from an earlier age, a representative of an Old Western order. One of the major themes of his scholarly work is that our stereotype of the Middle Ages is not accurate and was largely a creation of seventeenth and eighteenth century humanists. By uncritically accepting the stereotype we miss a great deal indeed. Even calling it “medieval” is a capitulation to the humanists; certainly the medievals didn’t think of themselves as such. According to his sources, the term *media tempestas* was first used in 1469. “And what can *media* imply,” he observes, “except that a thousand years of theology, metaphysics, jurisprudence, courtesy, poetry, and architecture are to be regarded as a mere gap, or chasm?” “A preposterous conception,” he argues, which requires us to agree with the humanists and devalue that which came before.

It is almost impossible to imagine that in the 1500s Calvinism was fresh and audacious and even fashionable. Yet this is what Lewis argues. Our associations with the word “puritan” have to be almost entirely corrected, he writes; “Whatever they were, they were not sour, gloomy, or severe; nor did their enemies bring any such charge against them.” On the contrary, Christians of the sixteenth century were ‘puritanical’ as a rule, and Protestantism was accused of being “not too grim, but too glad to be true.” Later Calvinists may have been severe; sixteenth century Calvinism, though, was not. Lewis insists that their context is vital: “The literary historian . . . is concerned not with those ideas in his period which have since proved fruitful, but with those which seemed important at the time. He must even try to forget his knowledge of what comes after, and see the egg as if he did not know it was going to become a bird.”

In his inaugural address at Cambridge, Lewis argued that the difference between medieval and renaissance has been “greatly
exaggerated,” especially compared to the transformations of the nineteenth century. He ends his discussion this way: “Lastly, I play my trump card. Between Jane Austen and us, but not between her and Shakespeare, Chaucer, Alfred, Virgil, Homer, or the Pharaohs, comes the birth of the machines.” The rise of the machines, Lewis says later, “really is the greatest change in the history of Western Man.” (I agree. Next to the Incarnation and the development of farming, no change created greater upheaval than industrialization.) By contrast, the change between late medieval period and the Renaissance is practically invisible, at least in England.

He has more in mind, though, than just historical revision. Lewis, with his long immersion in medieval and early modern literature, wants us to know that we can gain a great deal by listening to pre-industrial centuries. How do we listen, exactly? By reading the old books with well-tuned ear.

He offers similar advice, although in different forms, in Screwtape, his inaugural address, a few places in Narnia, and several essays. It’s implied in his professional scholarship. In “On The Reading of Old Books,” Lewis explicitly advises that for every new book we read, we ought to read one old. He suggests three supportive reasons. The first is that earlier ages had different blind spots than our own. Lewis argues for the practice of two of the basic Christian virtues: humility and reliance on the Body of Christ, the Church. Each generation, each community of believers, each family, each person has weaknesses. Reading the works of earlier generations will illuminate our mistakes and suggest correctives. Lewis speaks from experience – his writing leads one to suspect wide experience, actually.

Of course, reading older works really should be done with the intent to learn; one must be willing to receive what an earlier age has to give. Lewis writes thusly in The Screwtape Letters (and remember that Screwtape is a devil, so what he says is the opposite of what Lewis is arguing):

where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always the danger that the characteristic errors
of one may be corrected by the characteristics truths of another. But, thanks be to Our Father [by this Lewis means the devil] and the Historical Point of View, great scholars are now as little nourished by the past as the most ignorant mechanic who holds that ‘history is bunk.’

Expanding on the point:

Only the learned read old books, and we have now so dealt with the learned that they are of all men the least likely to acquire wisdom by doing so. We have done so by inculcating the Historical Point of View. The Historical Point of View, put briefly, means that when a learned man is presented with any statement in an ancient author, the one question he never asks is whether it is true.

“The characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the characteristics truths of another,” Lewis reminds. Yes, but only if we go looking, ready to receive what they have to offer.

His second point is that first-hand knowledge is more valuable than second hand. His third point, that reading original texts is more enjoyable, is debatable. On the one hand, Lewis’ love for old literature is unmistakable. In The Allegory of Love, he observes that his ideal day “would be to read the Italian epic – to be always convalescent from some small illness and always seated in a window that overlooked the sea, there to read these poems eight hours of each happy day.” “It is easy to forget,” Lewis writes in A Preface to Paradise Lost, “that the man who writes a good love sonnet needs not only to be enamoured of a woman, but also to be enamoured of the Sonnet.” Nonetheless, even for Lewis, reading can be burdensome. He admits as much. His English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama, runs to nearly seven hundred pages. One-third of this is devoted to what he calls the “Drab Age” which runs up to the 1570s. One can imagine the toil involved in writing a rather brilliant survey of literature one labels as “Drab.”
Nonetheless, reading other ages and other peoples, Lewis argues, is very likely to be delightful. Now, I could be more abstract and tell you it will ‘broaden your aesthetic appreciation,’ but that’s not what Lewis was going for. He chased after delight for its own sake; he was enchanted and wanted other readers to be enchanted, also. In our skeptical and cynical culture, delight can certainly aid our transformation into people who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. In both the delight and the transformation, we find the past unseating the present.

Here’s another way to put it. English professor Dennis Danielson observed that Lewis’ inaugural address is not simply about exposing and explaining the literature and ideals of earlier peoples, “it is also, even overwhelmingly, a critique of modernism.” That includes not only the ideas, but also the desires, the emotions, and the willingness to see life as “a festival, not a machine.” We could say the same about a great deal of Lewis’ writing.

“It is my settled conviction,” wrote Lewis in 1954, “that in order to read Old Western literature aright you must suspend most of the responses and unlearn most of the habits you have acquired in reading modern literature.”

And with that, the bridges become fords.

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