

REVIEWS AND BOOK NOTES

A TRANSLATOR REVIEWS ALISTER MCGRATH'S *C. S. LEWIS: A LIFE. ECCENTRIC GENIUS, RELUCTANT PROPHET*

Alister McGrath. *C. S. Lewis. A Life. Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*. London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton. 2013. xvi + 431 pages. ISBN 978-1-444-74552-8. £16.99

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Let us begin with a confession. The present reviewer has not read the complete works of C. S. Lewis. He has not ploughed through the secondary literature. He has not pored over the thousands of letters annotated and published in the last few years by Walter Hooper—all these being important feats of Alister E. McGrath, the author of the most recent biography of Clive Staples Lewis. Still, the reviewer is called to fair-mindedly appraise the author's finished work. According to which criteria and based on what standards, we may ask? In virtue of which qualifications or personal merits, we may ponder? All such questions have, of course, some satisfactory answers that can be given, pertaining either to the reviewer's credentials or to the nature of the task of reviewing books, but questions remain. If we add to this the burden (and privilege) of being both the book's translator into Romanian and its reviewer, the task at hand seems onerous indeed. A successful translation may result only if the translator has internalized his text. What he will deliver is at one and the same time *his* text and the author's. He is both a servant of someone else's creation, and a creator in his own right. The absorption of the text and the *enfleshing* of its ideas in a new idiom make fair-mindedness a quality even more difficult to display. But enough with the patting-oneself-on-the-back-lamentations.

From the outset, McGrath's declared, an ambitious purpose is to present a coherent narrative that integrates the many dimensions of C. S. Lewis: most famously, as author of the Chronicles of Narnia and other works of fiction (the imaginative dimension), as brother, friend, and spouse (the relational dimension), as accomplished academic (the academic dimension), and as Christian apologist (the apologetic dimension). McGrath prefers narrative coherence to a precise, but dry presentation of facts. His intention is to tell the story of C. S. Lewis, focusing on some of the most important dimensions of his life and work, particularly on the development of his thought, rather than 'documenting every aspect of Lewis' life.'

What recommends McGrath as a biographer of the famous author, academic and apologist? McGrath highlights some points of biographical

conjunction between himself and Lewis: the Irish roots, the conversion from atheism to Christianity, and the common Oxford education and career. It is not that these, in themselves, can supplant the intellectual skills and virtues necessary for writing a good biography, but they do help the reader warm to the author.

In writing his biography, McGrath has read Lewis' complete works in chronological order, and the wealth of secondary literature on Lewis and on his intellectual climate and circle of friends. No previous biographer has boasted of what seems like a sensible, if demanding preparatory task. Readers are informed that more academic treatments of major themes in Lewis' work and discussions of "some of the scholarly questions that emerge" have been left for a "more academic volume."

McGrath is no encomiast. His confessed admiration for and affinity with Lewis is well tempered. Not afraid to highlight the controversial elements in Lewis' fascinating life, McGrath presents an honest, critical account. The purpose is clearly not one of offering uncritical praise, but *understanding* Lewis, particularly his ideas, and identifying the deep themes and structures of his personal and professional life. This is "not a work of synopsis, but of analysis," "a critical biography," declares McGrath in the preface of the book.

McGrath dutifully describes the main periods and events of Lewis' life, probing their significance: the Irish childhood, the uneasy relationship with his father, the traumatic loss of his mother, the English boarding schools experience, the First World War, the enigmatic relationship with Mrs. Moore, the ups and downs in his friendship with J. R. R. Tolkien, his conversion from atheism to philosophical theism and then to Christianity, the Inklings, the fame that followed his highly successful radio talks on BBC, the academic failures and accomplishments, the marriage with Joy Davidman, and her untimely death. The focus remains on the formative influence these events have had on Lewis' thought life.

The principal source for the biography, which gives it one of its unique selling points, is Lewis's collected letters, over 3500 pages of text annotated and cross-referenced by Walter Hooper between 2000 and 2006. Unavailable to previous biographers, these constitute the backbone of McGrath's narrative, also enabling this biography's distinctive contribution: a compelling reconsideration of the date for Lewis' conversion from atheism to Christianity. A close reading of the letters leads McGrath to conclude that Lewis's conversion took place not during the Trinity term of 1929, as recorded by Lewis in *Surprised by Joy*, but roughly a year later. In establishing this conclusion, McGrath presents some excellent detective-style work and displays a commendable sensitivity to the interplay between Lewis's "inner" and "outer" worlds.

The discussion on Lewis' discovery of the Christian faith is rich and stimulating. We learn of Lewis' love of myth and of his discovery of the

Christian faith as ‘true myth’ and as an integrated vision of reality. This ‘big picture’ has room both for the longings and yearnings of the human heart (“arrows of Joy”) and for the operations of reason. Christianity is a capacious narrative that “makes sense of things”. McGrath shows Lewis discovering the way in which the Christian vision of reality reconciles reason and imagination. The two are indispensable and intertwined means of connecting with reality. McGrath also clarifies some of Lewis’ important distinctions, between “imaginary” and “imaginative” worlds, between “allegory” and “supposal”.

Now to turn to some comments of a more evaluative nature. The biography is well written. The style is clear and fluid, maybe dull at times. Nevertheless, when the material is of a poetic nature, McGrath shows his capacity for lyrical description. Particularly poignant is his discussion of Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, which contains some of Lewis’ most raw and uncensored reflections on pain and suffering, following Joy’s death.

Towards the end of the volume a sense of wistfulness is introduced when McGrath reveals Lewis’ letter to the Nobel Committee, nominating J. R. R. Tolkien for the 1961 Nobel Prize for Literature. The letter was discovered after January 2012, when the archives were finally opened to scholars, after a fifty-year embargo. We may note that the friendship with Tolkien is well documented. Even if Lewis regarded Tolkien as one of his “second class” friends, McGrath’s decision to insist on this relationship is warranted considering how influential Tolkien was in shaping Lewis’ understanding of the Christian faith at the time of his conversion. But while we are on the relational front, we may note a few puzzling omissions. First, the relationship with Hugo Dyson seems to be under McGrath’s biographical radar. No clear explanations are given as to why Dyson plays such a minor part in the narrative. More significantly, however, is the near absence of George MacDonald. Given the lasting influence he is known to have had on Lewis, the omission is all the more surprising.

On the subject of omissions, Lewis scholar Jerry Root notes McGrath’s “glaring lack of appreciation for how Lewis carefully selected literary genres to suit the material he wished to present”. He is referring particularly to McGrath’s reading of Lewis’ *Surprised by Joy*.¹ Indeed, McGrath seems to have applied a psychoanalytical hermeneutic, speculating on Lewis’ repressed memories and psychological hang-ups, which arguably makes for a strained reading of *Surprised by Joy*. At various points, McGrath seems puzzled by what Lewis includes and leaves out of his autobiographical account. But, as Root observes,

¹ Root, Jerry. “Does C. S. Lewis Have Something to Hide? Or is Alister McGrath’s biography too preoccupied with what Lewis declines to reveal?” *Christianity Today*, 22 November 2013. Web. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/november-web-only/does-c-s-lewis-have-something-to-hide.html>. Accessed 28 October 2014.

“his goal was not to give a comprehensive account of his life, but simply to tell the story of his conversion.” If this is true, one may need to look closer at Lewis’s account to discover a much more purposeful selection and literary technique than McGrath imagines.

McGrath’s treatment of the Joy Davidman episode in Lewis’ life will surprise, if not shock viewers of the admittedly saccharine cinematographic rendition in the *Shadowlands*. The relationship with Davidman has bewildered and miffed Lewis’ closest friends and, later, his biographers. McGrath makes no exception. Up until the final period of Joy’s life, the relationship is cast almost entirely in a negative light. For a biography that seeks a critical distance from its subject matter, the moral judgments that underlie some of McGrath’s descriptions of Joy and her relationship with Lewis create a strange tension. It is worth giving an example, and a significant one at that. McGrath quotes Davidman’s younger son, Douglas Gresham, to make the point that his mother’s specific intention for going to England was “to seduce C. S. Lewis.” But as Gina Dalfonzo notes, McGrath has missed the tone of Gresham’s remark and is guilty of perpetuating an inaccuracy. The quote from Gresham reads as follows: “She was not above telling nosy friends that she was going to England to seduce C. S. Lewis.” This is quite clearly a jocular remark, not uncharacteristic of Davidman. Sadly, this is but one example that shows McGrath’s particularly negative appraisal of Davidman and her relationship with Lewis.¹

When McGrath finally mentions the love between the two and Lewis’ searing pain at her loss, the reader cannot help feel slightly detached emotionally. Could this be traced to McGrath’s failure to convey vividly enough Lewis’s psychological and emotional development in relation to Joy Davidman? What is undeniable is that, sadly, the reader struggles to empathize when McGrath offers a description of Joy’s final moments and Lewis’ ensuing pain.

Finally, one cannot shake off the impression that the biography has been shaped to a large extent by marketing concerns arising from the ‘Lewis phenomenon’. In particularly harsh words, Arend Smilde, a Dutch translator and editor of Lewis’ works, goes so far as to say that the book is just “an extended contemporary comment on the Lewis phenomenon disguised as biography”.² That is clearly an overstatement, which implicitly raises the question of the nature of a biography. McGrath has clearly delineated his aims and methodology from the very beginning. Lewis is best remembered as the author of the

¹ Dalfonzo, Gina. “C. S. Lewis’s Joy in Marriage. What I think Alister McGrath got wrong about Lewis’s wife, Joy Davidman.” *Christianity Today*, 8 October 2013. Web. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/october-web-only/cs-lewis-joy-in-marriage.html?paging=off>. Accessed 28 October 2014.

² Smilde, Arend. “Critical Notes on McGrath’s Biography of C. S. Lewis.” *Lewisiana*. Web. <http://lewisiana.nl/mcgrathbio/>. Accessed 28 October 2014.