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A Toast to the Memory of C. S. Lewis

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Abstract

Text of a toast given by Cecil Harwood at the Friends of Lewis Party, 4 July 1975, at Magdalene College, Oxford. A collection of personal anecdotes by a longtime friend.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Personal reminiscences

A Toast to the Memory of C.S. Lewis

Proposed at Magdalen College, July 4th, 1975 by A.C. Harwood



Cecil Harwood (on the right) giving the Toast at the Friends of Lewis Party, 4 July 1975, at Magdalene College, Oxford. (Walter Hooper at left.)

Editor's note: Each summer since Lewis's death there has been a gathering of Friends of C.S. Lewis—colleagues, friends, former students, and simple admirers. (Two fine scenes of the 1972 party are in Images of His World, by Gilbert and Kilby.) There is good talk, cakes and cheese, and wine. The Toast in 1975 was given by A.C. Harwood, whom Lewis called "a wholly imperturbable man" and "the sole Horatio known to me in this age of Hamlets." We are grateful to the New York C.S. Lewis Society for permission to reprint the Toast.

WHEN I HAVE HEARD previous speakers on these occasions, they have mostly spoken of some aspect of Lewis's work in which they have taken the greatest delight or from which they have most benefited. And there is God's plenty to choose from. Far more than Oliver Goldsmith did Lewis deserve the epitaph composed by Samuel Johnson: *Nullum fere scribendi genus non tetigit: nullum tetigit quod non ornavit* ["Who left scarcely any kind of writing untouched, and nothing touched that he did not adorn"]. Literary and historical criticism, verse of many kinds, allegory, history, theology, Christian ethics and practise, planetary fiction, children's books—all came from his pen with equal readiness

and forcefulness and in equal abundance. He had a teeming mind. When his fellow undergraduates were producing perhaps one exquisite lyric (now well forgotten) in a month, he was writing a young epic; and when he was told that one of its cantos was not up to standard he went away and produced another in the space of a few days.

Like all who read his books—or were privileged to enjoy his conversation—I learnt very much from him, though others have made profounder studies in his works and been more deeply influenced by them. My own great debt to him—it could not have been greater—was that of an abiding friendship, which defied all differences of opinion, outlook and interests. I find that many of the experiences which live most vividly in my memory are those which I shared with him.

I remember one of my early sojourns at the Kilns, when there had been a heavy fall of snow in the night with no wind. We went out in the morning into a world transformed. Everything bore its replica in white. We tried to find words to express the beauty—and the silence—of this new world, but ended speechless before it.

At the other end of our meetings, on the last occasion when he was well enough to pay a visit to my home in Sussex,



Colin Hardy on far left, Glen GoodKnight on left center, C.S. Kilby in center, Cecil Harwood on right.

we were assailed after sunset by one of those tremendous storms when thunder and lightning were almost instantaneous and the whole house was wrapped in blinding flashes of light. We sat in a darkened room with open windows, overwhelmed by the sheer power of the elements. Jack said afterwards he had rarely been so frightened, and had never so much enjoyed being frightened.

An almost equally memorable occasion was when I spent a weekend with him in Magdalen during the war. He had just discovered the works of that incomparable novelist of High Life, Mrs. Amanda Ross. We read one of her books to each other in turn until convulsions overcame the reader, and we ended by—literally—rolling together on the floor in one of those paroxysms of painful laughter which rarely visit one (alas) after one grows up.

He was at his best on walking tours when his delight in Nature vied with his enjoyment of conversation, in which of course he took a leading part. The day's walk had to be carefully planned so that we reached an inn about one o'clock—he held sandwiches in anathema, as one of his printed letters testifies. There were grand tours with a muster of six or seven, but I remember well two or three walks we took alone. One was down the Wye Valley—then still a pretty remote place. As we came down from the hills to Tintern Abbey he shouted for joy that the hedges were still just as Wordsworth described them:

These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild.

Whenever I read those lines, I hear Jack declaiming them as we strode down the hill.

In earlier years, when he often stayed with me in London, there were many visits to theatres and picture galleries. I remember especially walking with him to the charming little gallery in Dulwich and his delight in the classical landscapes of Poussin. There was one terrible occasion, of which I was recently reminded on looking through his letters, when—I suppose through dilatoriness—I had failed to secure tickets for *The Ring*. On my confessing my failure, I received the following letter in Johnsonian style, of which he was almost as eloquent a master as the great Doctor himself.

Magdalen College
May 7th '34

Sir,

I have read your pathological letter with such sentiments as it naturally suggests, and write

to inform you that you need expect from me no ungenerous reproach. It would be cruel if it were possible, and impossible if it were attempted, to add to the mortification which you must now be supposed to suffer. Where I cannot console, it is far from my purpose to aggravate; for it is part of the complicated misery of your state that while I pity your sufferings I cannot innocently wish them lighter. He would be no friend to your reason or your virtue, who would wish to pass over so great a miscarriage in heartless frivolity or brutal insensibility

As soon as you can, pray let me know through some respectable acquaintance in what quarter of the globe you intend to sustain that irrevocable exile, and perpetual disgrace to which you have condemned yourself. Do not give in to despair. Learn from this example the fatal consequences of error, and hope in some humbler station and some distant land that you may yet become useful to your species.

Later I received a letter of forgiveness in the same vein, calculated to wither any part of me which the earlier letter had left unscathed.

He was a wonderful guest to have in the house, and always wrote the most charming "bread-and-butter" letters to his hostess. He is said to have regretted that he had had so little to do with children, and indeed never felt at home with them. All I can say is that my own children adored him. He entered with complete seriousness into their concerns, swung with them on their swing and went swimming with them, and delighted them by discoursing volubly on some philosophical subject the moment his head appeared after he had dived into the muddy Sussex water. He played with them the noble game of heads, bodies and tails and excelled everyone in his sketches; or, when more literary games succeeded, his contributions (one at least of which has survived) were of course masterly.

All this illustrates the fact that he lived in the present moment. No-one was less given to reminiscences—or to repining. I can hear him heartily deprecating all I have ventured to tell you about him this afternoon. He wrote me once that I should not be sorry for him because his illness deprived him of many things he had loved to do, because "you soon cease to want to do the things you know you can't do." And his interest was in people, not in institutions. That,

I think, is why, when I read his works, I seem to hear him speaking to me. His benefactions, which were very great, were mostly to individuals, not to societies. He had enormous sympathy for the "little man." On one occasion when I was deprecating some modern housing estate, he said: "But if you could see not the houses, but the souls of the people in them, it might look very different." Indeed we shall never be true men "till we have faces." But I believe he felt that the simple man with his simple virtues might often be nearer that achievement than the sophisticated savant.

I would like to end with a brief anecdote. Some months ago I had to visit the North of England, and I had secured not a compartment to myself—progress has deprived us of such amenities—but at least reasonable breathing space, when at the last minute a naval petty officer entered with his wife and children, to whom he had plainly been giving a treat in town, perhaps on returning from some voyage. Each child had been given some hideous toy, a doll as big as the child herself, or some monstrous Walt Disney creation, and each was flourishing a Comic of unbelievable vulgarity. The eldest, a girl of about fourteen, had received an elaborate manicure and makeup set—plainly not the first she had used. But she was a friendly child, and when I began to read she looked up and asked, "Is that a nice book?" I said it was a very nice book, and in return enquired if she was fond of reading, and what she liked best to read? "O," she said,

"far the best I like the Narnia Tales of C.S. Lewis. I read them again and again." So we talked about C.S. Lewis, and she was amazed to think she was talking to someone who had actually known him. It happened that I had just received the current excellent bulletin of the New York Lewis Society, and I had brought it with me to read in the train, so of course I produced it for her to see. She was astounded that people in America knew about Lewis. "If they know about him there, he must be a great man," she said. (I present the compliment to their country to my American friends.)

All the rest of the journey I was thinking of what Jack had done for that little girl. What a window he had opened from her banal and vulgar surroundings into the world of imagination. Indeed he opened windows for many people into realms hitherto unknown to them. No doubt he would have felt his greatest achievement was to open the windows of Christianity in a way no-one else had done in his generation. But I rather think he would have been on another level as delighted by the tribute of the little girl in the train. He has indeed opened windows for us all, or we would not be here. Let us drink his memory, in gratitude for what each one of us has received from him.

We note with sadness that A.C. Harwood died in September of 1975.

REMINISCENCES

by Walter Hooper

Presented to Mythcon VI, Scripps College, August 16th, 1975

The talk appears here as revised by Walter Hooper for publication.

I CERTAINLY CAN CALL YOU LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, but I'd rather call you friends. I've dreaded this moment ever since I was invited to this convention. I really have dreaded it awfully. "What will I do in front of all these people?" I asked myself. "Everything in the world happens here, and what can my little talk possibly mean to them?" But since I've been here I've never met so much kindness. And at the risk of sounding rather gushy, something which I should very carefully avoid in Oxford, I must say that you have forced me into loving you. I'm very, very grateful indeed for the great kindness you have shown me; especially Glen and Bonnie, and a great many others whose names are well known in England, such as Kathryn Lindskoog and Bernie Zuber. I think you forget that, though there are many people in England whom you would like to see, there are a great many in California whom we would like to see.

I begin with an apology. I realize that I have an almost negligible knowledge of C.S. Lewis compared with those people who knew him much better, such as Owen Barfield and Professor Tolkien, and many others as well. I am reminded of the funeral arranged for Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois. Because the great man could not himself be there to speak, and because a great many of his friends had died as well, his old dog Fido was brought, so to speak, out of mothballs. He was still alive. Now I think you must receive me as something of a "Fido." You can't have Tolkien, and I don't think you shall be able to

have Owen Barfield just yet, or indeed a great many of the others, the great "Greats." So this is not so much like using your dinosaurs while you have them as making what use you can of your "Fidos." For that is all I can claim to be.

After hearing so many extremely good papers and such lovely music—as indeed I knew I would—I thought, "What can I do? What can I give that you can't do better yourselves?" This may be highly experimental, but I believe the best thing I can do is tell you something of what I found C.S. Lewis to be like—the man himself. This is partly because I recall that when I first met someone who had seen and spoken with C.S. Lewis, it was very like the people in Springfield seeing Fido, who had been touched by the Master. He had bow-wowed for the Master, had eaten Presidential bones.

WHEN I WENT to see C.S. Lewis I had already enjoyed ten years of correspondence with him. But I did not, at that point, know nearly so much about him as possibly you do. For you knew him years later, when much has been said and written about him. In fact, none of the things which have been talked about tonight were available at that time. I first read Lewis's books when I was an undergraduate—about your age—and I remember thinking, "I wish I could know everything about him. What a terrible and crushing truth that one can live and die in the same world and never know him."

Anyway, after ten years of correspondence with Lewis, I