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An Introduction to Narnia: Part 1

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Abstract

Reviews the chronology of the Narnia books, both the internal parts set in Narnia and those set on Earth, and the chronology of publication, with additional discussion of “The Narnian Suite” in Lewis’s collected poems.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Chronology

AN INTRODUCTION TO NARNIA

by J.R. Christopher

PART I: THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE CHRONICLES



The Chronicles of Narnia consist of seven children's books and one non-chronological poem, all written by C.S. Lewis. They were published in the following order:

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Geoffrey Bles, 1950)
Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia (Geoffrey Bles, 1951)
The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader" (Geoffrey Bles, 1952)
The Silver Chair (Geoffrey Bles, 1953)
"Narnian Suite" (Part 2 of the final poem; *Punch*, CCXXV, 4 November 1953, p. 553)
The Horse and his Boy (Geoffrey Bles, 1954)
The Magician's Nephew (Bodley Head, 1955)
The Last Battle (Bodley Head, 1956)
"Narnian Suite" (both parts, the second revised; *Poems*, ed. by Walter Hooper, Geoffrey Bles, 1964)

All of the novels, either as a subtitle on the title page or on the wrapper or both, have the words *A Story for Children*. The novels were printed in the United States in the same years as listed above by Macmillan; *Poems* appeared in America in 1965 from Harcourt, Brace and World.

Before considering other dating systems for the series, I should like to discuss briefly the non-chronological element in this chronology, the poem. The first section, "March for Strings, Kettledrums, and Sixty-three Dwarfs," begins this way:

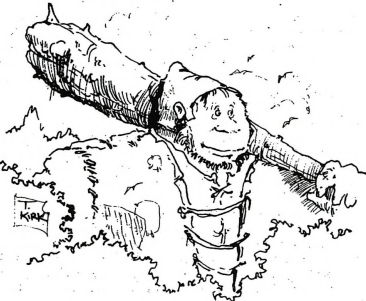
With plucking pizzicato and the prattle of the kettledrum
We're trotting into battle mid a clatter of accoutrement;
Our beards are big as periwigs and trickle with opananax,
And trinketry and treasure twinkle out on every part of us—
(Scrape! Tap! The fiddle and the kettledrum).

(*Poems*, pp. 6-7)

The internal rhymes suggest several of the poems collected by J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* — and, indeed, the mere appearance of a metrical supplement to the Chronicles of Narnia suggests an impulse in Lewis parallel to Tolkien's expanding mental universe. (Thomas Hardy showed the same impulse when, for example, he wrote six poems echoing his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: "Growth in May," "We Field-Women," "The Slow Nature," "Tess' Lament," "At Middlefield Gate in February," and "Beyond the Last Lamp.") Moving from creativity to technique, I suggest that part of the effect in the above stanza is obtained by the use of high vowels, particularly the short *i*.

The second section, "March for Drum, Trumpet, and Twenty-One Giants," begins with this stanza:

With stamping stride in pomp and pride
We come to thump and floor ye;
We'll bump your lumphish heads to-day
And tramp your ramparts into clay,
And as we stamp and romp and play
Our trumpet'll blow before us—
Oh! tramp it, tramp it, tramp it, trumpet, trumpet blow before us!



Here, in addition to the internal rhymes, one notices the use of low vowels — the short *a* and the *u* of *bump* which is close to a schwa in sound. (These low vowels are as appropriate for giants as the high vowels were for dwarfs.) But this second part of the "Narnian Suite" does not exist in isolation. First, the last stanza of this second part:

Ho! tremble town and tumble down
And crumble shield and sabre!
Your kings will mumble and look pale,
Your horses stumble or turn tail,
Your skimbles-scambles counsels fail,
So rumble drum belaboured—
Oh rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble drum belaboured!

Second, a passage from *The Last Battle*, describing Tirian, Eustace, Poggin the Dwarf, Jill, Puzzle the Donkey, and Jewel the Unicorn going (they think) to meet Roonwit the Centaur and the aid he is bringing: It was a little after two in the afternoon when they set out, and it was the first really warm day of that spring. The young leaves seemed to be much farther out than yesterday: the snowdrops were over, but they saw several primroses. The sunlight slanted through the trees, birds sang, and always (though usually out of sight) there was the noise of running water. It was hard to think of terrible things like Tash. The children felt, "This is really Narnia at last." Even Tirian's heart grew lighter as he walked ahead of them, humming an old Narnian marching song which had the refrain:

Ho, rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble,
Rumble drum belaboured.

(*The Last Battle*, p. 90)

Presumably, since the second part of the poem was first published in 1953 and the book in 1956, Tirian is right in thinking it "an old Narnian marching song."



But this last comment of mine raises the question of the dates of composition of the novels (I know nothing about the poem except its publication dates). There are two basic sources of information on the composition. One is Lewis' brief comment, entitled "It All Began with a Picture..." (collected in *Of Other Worlds*); the essential passage of this note for readers of the *Junior Radio Times* is this:

All my seven Narnian books... began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story, just pictures. The *Lion* all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture has been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: "Let's try to make a story about it."

At first I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. I think I had been having a good many dreams of lions about that time. Apart from that, I don't know where the *Lion* came from or why He came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories in after him.

(*Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* ed. by Walter Hooper; Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966; p. 42)

Since Lewis was born in 1898, the image of the Faun came to him about 1914 and he began to write the story about 1938 — the latter date being far earlier than that of publication, 1950. The second source of information is in Roger Lancelyn Green's *C.S. Lewis (A Bodley Head Monograph, 1963)*. In one passage, based on Lewis' authority, he reaffirms the early date: "The earliest sketch for the first book was made in 1938; it was very different from the final version, and Aslan did not appear in it" (p. 48). But a fuller passage appears earlier in Green's booklet:

In his book on Lewis as a theological writer, published in (America only) in 1949, Chad Walsh says, when dealing with possible books

to come, 'He talks vaguely on completing a children's book which he has begun' in the tradition of E. Nesbit!'

This referred to the first few chapters of The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, a story which had been forming in his mind for some time, but of which only a little had been written down, but then set aside owing to criticism from one of his older friends by then out of touch with children and their books, and wedded to different modes of thought where fairy-tale and fantasy were concerned. However the story was not to be kept down; by March 1949 he was working on it again, reading the early chapters to another friend, who proved more encouraging — and perhaps saw more clearly that here was the beginning of a really new and exciting development in children's literature.

(pp. 36-37)

Of course, it would be interesting to identify these friends. One might guess (and it would be nothing more than that) that the second friend was Green himself, who is the author of both children's books. But who was the first friend? Surely it was neither of his closest friends, Owen Barfield, whose children's book The Silver Trumpet appeared in 1925, nor J. R. R. Tolkien, whose like contribution The Hobbit appeared in 1937. Green continues about the writing of the books:

The sequel, Prince Caspian, was written by the end of the year (i.e., 1949), and 1950 must have been spent by Lewis largely in exploring and living in the new world which had, as it were, been shown to him: for by the time The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe was published that autumn, The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader" and The Horse and his Boy were finished, and The Silver Chair nearing completion. After this there was a pause, much longer being spent on The Magician's Nephew, which was not completed until the end of 1951, to be followed by the final installment, The Last Battle, written two years later.

Thus we have this chronology of writing:

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1938 and 1949)

Prince Caspian (1949)

The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader" (1950)

The Horse and his Boy (1950)

The Silver Chair (1950 and perhaps 1951)

The Magician's Nephew (1951)

The Last Battle (1953)

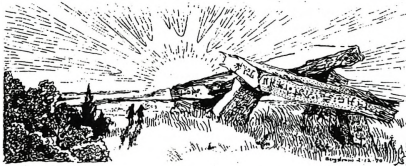
This list involves one reversal of sequence from the publication: The Silver Chair was published before The Horse and his Boy, not after. Interestingly enough, this inverted publication also involves an allusion of one work to the other: in The Silver Chair, while Eustace and Jill are at Cair Paravel, before their journey, they have a dinner—

And when all the serious eating and drinking was over, a blind poet (like Homer) came forward and struck up the grand old tale of Prince Cor and Aravis and the horse Bree, which is called The Horse and his Boy and tells of an adventure that happened in Narnia and Calormen and the lands between, in the Golden Age when Peter was High King in Cair Paravel. (I haven't time to tell it now, though it is well worth hearing.)

(p. 48)

Since Lewis had already written "the grand old tale," he could feel safe in so whetting his audience's appetites for a book yet to be published; but when the books are read according to their internal chronology, The Horse and his Boy is a grand old tale by the time of The Silver Chair.

And this observation brings us to the third chronology, that internal to the sequence. Here a double chronology is actually involved: the earth time and the Narnian time. (The article which has most clearly discussed Narnian time is "Chronicles of Narnia" by M. S. Crouch, in The Junior Bookshelf, for November, 1956; see p. 248.) This double chronology can be outlined in this form:



The Magician's Nephew (1955).

The earth time is two generations before the approximate date of publication, when "Mr. Sherlock Holmes was still living in Baker Street and the Bastables were looking for treasure in the Lewissham Road." (p. 7). Since E. Nesbit published her Bastable books at the turn of the century, her volumes give a more precise date than the lengthier Holmes saga: The Story of the Treasure-Seekers, 1899; The Would-Be-Goods, 1901; and The New Treasure-Seekers, 1904.

The Narnian time is that of Creation. (The reader also sees the end of the world of Charn and a place between the worlds, but these are not time sequences of importance in later volumes.)

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950).

The earth time is during the Second World War, for Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy Pevensie are evacuees from London to Professor Kirk's home in the country; the "old professor" (p. 9) is, as is

revealed elsewhere, the Digory Kirk, the magician's nephew, of the previous book. (Lewis mentions some children in his household in a September 18, 1939, letter to his brother — see that date in Letters of C. S. Lewis, edited by W. H. Lewis, in either the British or American edition; the date of this letter is only a year later than the date given earlier for the first draft of this book.)

The Narnian time is less precise. M. S. Crouch in his chronology mentioned above says simply, "Some centuries have passed." The general feeling, if analogies from earth chronology are permissible, is that of the medieval period — although not all of the details fit (Mrs. Beaver's sewing machine, for example). Mrs. Beaver refers to "old rhymes," which also suggest a long passage of time. (In The Last Battle, (p. 91), Jewel the Unicorn refers to the "hundreds and thousands of years" between visits of earthlings to Narnia.)

The Horse and his Boy (1954).

Earth time is not considered.

In the last chapter of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the Pevensies grow up to be the rulers of Narnia; this story is set during their rule, and indeed during the final chapter Lucy tells the story of their coming to Narnia (p. 197).

Prince Caspian (1951).

The earth time is a year later than that in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (p. 7); whether or not World War Two is still going on is uncertain, although a reference in the next book to wartime adventures (in the plural) suggests it is. At any rate the Pevensies are on their way back to their boarding schools, waiting at a railroad station; they have been given sandwiches by their mother, so they seem not to be living with Professor Kirk any more.

The Narnian time is several hundred years — perhaps five hundred or more — later than the previous two books: the orchard planted at Cair Paravel has grown up to the northern gate, the castle itself has lost its roof, and the peninsula on which the castle stood has become (perhaps with the aid of some digging) an island (pp. 21-22). The reign of the Pevensies is remembered as "the Golden Age" of Narnia (p. 51), and, although it is not clear how long after their reign it was before the Telmarines under Caspian the First conquered the country (p. 44), the book is about the fight of Caspian the Tenth for his throne (his number is given on p. 55), which indicates at least the minimum number of generations since the conquest. Lewis' comment, in The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader", that, "when the Pevensie children had returned to Narnia last time for their second visit, it was (for the Narnians) as if King Arthur came back to Britain, as some people say he will. And I say the sooner the better" (p. 19). But he does not indicate if he is thinking of the medieval Arthur of the romance (which would make the period 800 or 900 years) or the earlier Arthur of the Celtic fight against the Anglo-Saxons (which would make the period about 1,500 years).

The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader" (1952).

The earth time is stated to be post-War in this volume, for reference is made to the "wonderful adventures (which the Pevensies had had) long ago in the war years." Probably the date is about the time of the writing, 1950, for the hiring of the children's father to lecture "in America for sixteen weeks that summer" (p. 10) does not suggest the period of austerity immediately after the war.

The Narnian time is stated, precisely, but unfortunately the passage raises some questions about earth time; this conversation is on page 23:

"Meanwhile," said Caspian, "we want to talk."

"By Jove, we do," said Edmund. "And first, about time."

It's a year by our time since we left you just before your coronation. How long has it been in Narnia?"

"Exactly three years," said Caspian.

If this adventure is one year in earth time after Prince Caspian, and that is one year after The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, how can the latter (and possibly Prince Caspian too) have happened "long ago in the war years"? No doubt other scholars will return to this topic in other papers — certainly a complete study would include a discussion of the school careers of the Pevensies: it is clearly stated, for example, that Lucy is attending boarding school for the first time in Prince Caspian (p. 8), but I do not know enough about English schools to know whether this indicates her age is then six (as it would for the first grade in America).

The Silver Chair (1953).

The earth time is about the end of the second week of a thirteen-week school term (p. 15) in the autumn (p. 11) following the summer adventure of the previous volume (p. 13). Nothing which I can see in the account of Eustace Scrubb and Jill Pole at Experiment House clears up the confusion of earth-time sequence in the previous volume.

The Narnian time may be dated fairly precisely by Eustace's remark after having seen Caspian the Tenth as an old man:

"... apparently it's been about seventy years — Narnian years — since I was here last" (p. 46). But I am not certain that Eustace, or any school boy, is really a very good judge of age. We may obtain a general date in another way. Caspian brought Ramanda's



daughter back from his voyage in the previous book as his bride (p. 58); how soon after their marriage they had a son Rilian, we are not told, but Rilian was "a very young knight" (p. 57) when his mother was killed by the serpent, and it has been "about ten years" (p. 56) since her death and Rilian's disappearance to the time of this adventure. Assuming that Rilian was about fifteen when his mother died, the story takes place twenty-five years after his birth. There is no technical disagreement here with Eustace's "seventy years" since, assuming Caspian was about twenty when he went on the voyage, he could have had a son at the age of sixty-five and be about ninety in this book (he is called "an old, old man" on p. 36); but while there is no technical disagreement, it seems odd the forty-five year wait for a child is not mentioned. (I have not worried about menopause affecting Ramandu's daughter since she was the daughter of a star and probably did not age in a human fashion.) Thus there seems to be a conflict between Eustace's "seventy" and Caspian's white beard on one hand and Rilian's age on the other.



SONG of JOY

Composed by Bruce McMenomy

Based on the Eagle's song, from J. R. R. Tolkien's The Return of the King, Houghton Mifflin, p. 241

Here is the poem in full, that was printed only two-thirds finished in Mythlore 4. My apologies to Bruce McMenomy. The full page illustration by George Barr for this poem can be found in the fourth issue. - GG.

Down from the hills it rings; ever glorious and triumphant it ascends to the highest summits of the earth. Like a golden note from a silver trumpet it mounts up into the western sky upon the wings of eagles and wraps the world in its commanding cloak of joy.

Sing now, ye people of the Tower of Anor,
for the Realm of Sauron is ended for ever,
and the Dark Tower is thrown down.

It rises to mingle with the droplets of the feathery clouds; it thunders through the base earth until it shudders like a banner in the wind. It flies from every lip to every ear, and leaps from every heart to every mind to every heart again.

Sing and rejoice, ye people of the Tower of Guard,
for your watch hath not been in vain,
and the Black Gate is broken,
and your king hath passed through,
and he is victorious.

The Last Battle (1956).

The earth time is "more than a year" later (p. 54), although no extended earth narration occurs in the book.

The Narnian time is "over two hundred years" later (p. 54), with King Tirian being the seventh in descent from Rilian. Another way of dating the book, to match the Creation of The Magician's Nephew, is to say that the Narnian time is that of Doomsday.

Thus this double chronology involves one general principle: Narnian time always flows faster than earth time. This may be stated despite Lewis' statement on pages 18 and 19 of The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader": "if you went back to Narnia after spending a week here (i.e., on earth), you might find that a thousand Narnian years had passed, or only a day, or no time at all. You never know till you get there." There are no instances in the books of Narnian time flowing at a slower rate than earth time. However, another comment which Lewis makes in the same place may be accepted on the basis of the books: "If you spent a hundred years in Narnia, you would still come back to our world at the very same hour of the very same day on which you left." Indeed, from the books, it would seem that a traveller reappears nearly at the same minute he left.

One final comment about the above double chronology. In my notes, I have assumed that Lewis' statements of time are factual (even when they disagree), but of course in reality they are artistic instead. In the Grave-digger Scene in Hamlet, the hero of that play is identified as being thirty years old (the gravemaker says that he came to his position "that very day that young Hamlet was born" and that he has "been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years"), but this is manifest nonsense since Hamlet in the first act was identified as a student at Wittenburg University (students began their university careers in the middle ages often at fifteen or sixteen — surely he is twenty at the oldest). In short, Shakespeare has provided a symbolic aging, to suggest Hamlet's greater maturity at the end of the play. Likewise, in The Silver Chair, Lewis wants Rilian young and Caspian old for symbolic reasons, whatever a factual chronology may suggest; also he wants only a year between each adventure of the Pevensies even though the time-setting shifts from the time the first was written, at the beginning of World War Two; to the post-war years when the others were written. In short, the contradictions are artistry, not errors.

The drums of the deep speak again, and their voice sounds the end of the old and the beginning of the new. The tumult is ended, the order has begun. The throne is filled again, the elf-stone shines forth brilliantly between sun and moon, and mantle white flows upon the wind.

Sing and be glad, all ye children of the West,
for your King shall come again,
and he shall dwell among you
all the days of your life.

In the way of the lofty eagle and beneath the track of the lowly ant echoes song; it is chanted by the mighty choirs of great and small, and is taken up by all creatures. The stars and the planets and the winds of the vastness of the heavens spin and reel with the mighty rhythm of the great dance. The trees grow and the grass sways and death is transformed to life.

And the tree that is withered shall be renewed,
and he shall plant it in high places,
and the city shall be blessed.

With single mighty voice the great rise to praise the small, and the small to praise the great. The earth and the sky become as one and all things are illuminated and bright. O gift of joyous song, leave the earth never, until all things are passed away. Sound from this day unto the dawn of eternity!

Sing all ye people!

And the people sang in all the ways of the City.