



A LIFE *O*BSERVED

A Spiritual Biography
of C. S. Lewis

DEVIN BROWN



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Devin Brown, *A Life Observed*
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Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brown, Devin.

A life observed : a spiritual biography of C. S. Lewis / Devin Brown.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58743-335-1 (pbk.)

1. Lewis, C. S. (Clive Staples), 1898–1963—Religion. 2. Christian literature,

English—History and criticism. I. Title.

BX5199.L53B76 2013

230'.092—dc23

2013007334

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13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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In memory of my father,
whose work as an electrician
paid for all those books
I grew up loving

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Foreword

It takes a confident man to write a biography of C. S. Lewis and then turn to me for comments. After all, there have been many biographies of Jack already written, including the one I wrote for children. I have said often enough that they vary from the good to the bad to the just plain ugly. Biographies are written for a variety of reasons, and these too vary in the same way: some are written to advance knowledge of the subject and his or her work; others, to advance the biographer in fame and fortune; and still others are little more than attempts to leap on a passing bandwagon. But the biography that follows is different. It has a better, more valuable reason for its existence.

I have more or less given up reading the new biographies of Jack, not so much because of the inaccuracies they contain—though there are usually enough of them—but because they are written by people who knew him far less well than I did, if they knew him at all. Their words, speaking only of the good biographies, are the products of much reading of Jack's works and much research into what others have written about him. They are consequently prone not only to error but also to a more

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serious malady—they dry out! The pages crackle with facts, faces, places, dates, and history. Some of them are very good books *about* Jack, but—here’s the rub—Jack is not in them.

But this book is different. It is the story of Jack’s real and true life—not the mere flash of the firefly in the infinite darkness of time that is our momentary life in this world, but the one he left this world to begin—and how he came to attain it. Brown helpfully works his way through the dross and difficulties of Jack’s earthly life in search of every factor, every influence, every event, and all of the people who showed Jack where the narrow path lay and taught him where it led.

I am the only person now living who lived with Jack in his home and grew to know him very well. I am the only person alive who watched as Jack wept with the pain of a crippling illness and yet smiled at me, saying that it was just something to be borne with fortitude and “is probably very good for me.” I grew up with Jack as my guide. This real Jack whom I knew walks the pages of this book.

Douglas Gresham
Malta, February 2013

Preface

There is a kind of C. S. Lewis biography which is lengthy and definitive. In it readers find out when Lewis's great-great-grandfather was born and what Richard Lewis, for that was his name, did for a living.

This is not that kind of biography.

Anyone who sets out to write a new book about a famous person should do so only because either (a) some new source of information has become available or (b) the author takes a new approach. My justification for *A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis* is the latter.

While other biographers have provided excellent comprehensive, broad-ranging accounts of the events—large and small—which surrounded Lewis's life, my goal is to focus closely on the story of Lewis's spiritual journey and his search for the object of the mysterious longing he called Joy (always capitalized), a quest which he claimed was the central story of his life.

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis concentrated on the key aspects of the Christian faith. My focus in this biography could be described as *Mere C. S. Lewis*. My hope is to provide a concise

introduction to Lewis and his best-known works for a new generation of readers, a generation who may know him only through the Narnia films.

In the preface to his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis cautions that how far the story matters to anyone but himself will depend on the degree to which they, too, have experienced the special longing he calls Joy. He finishes the preface with this declaration: “I have tried to so write the first chapter that those who can’t bear such a story will see at once what they are in for and close the book with the least waste of time” (viii).

I can do no better than to echo this statement in my own preface.

Before starting, I have a few words of housekeeping. When quoting from other sources, I indicate the author or the work within the text. After the quote, I give the page number in parentheses. Readers who wish to look up a quotation can find the source in the bibliography. To keep citations to a minimum, whenever I have two or more quotes in the same paragraph from the same page of any source, I include the page number only after the first quotation. I have used Americanized spellings and have written out any words that were abbreviated.

I have needed to use a few abbreviations of my own. To indicate quotations from the recently published three-volume set *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, I use the abbreviations *CLI*, *CLII*, and *CLIII*. With quotations from the unpublished *Lewis Papers* at the Wade Center at Wheaton College, I use the abbreviation *LP*. In addition, all references to Lewis’s diary come from *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis, 1922–1927*. References to the diary of Warren Lewis come from *Brothers and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis*. Information on these works can be found in the bibliography at the end of this book.

In a letter written as he was nearing the completion of his monumental work *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*,

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Excluding Drama, Lewis confesses that he was afraid of hidden errors, for unlike a mistake in a laboratory experiment which immediately makes itself known, a literary mistake exists in silence “till the day it turns irrevocable in a printed book and the book goes for review to the only man in England who would have known it was a mistake” (*CLIII*, 149–50). A number of people deserve thanks for helping answer my questions and correct my mistakes. They include David Downing, Alan Jacobs, Peter Schakel, Laura Schmidt, Phil Tallon, Heidi Truty, Michael Ward, the Reverend Tim Stead, and the staffs of St. Mark’s Church in Belfast and Holy Trinity Church in Headington. I want to especially thank Karen Koehn, Marv Hinten, Richard James, and Richard Platt for their extensive comments, insights, and encouragement. In addition, I would like to express my deep appreciation to Douglas Gresham for his help in making my portrait of Jack more accurate.

Prologue

A Longing Nothing Can Satisfy

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

—*Mere Christianity*, book 3, chapter 10

Introduction

At around four in the afternoon, on November 22, 1963, Warren Hamilton Lewis carried tea to the small downstairs bedroom of his home in the quiet English suburbs. He was glad to see that his younger brother, who had been in poor health for several months, was resting comfortably, though very drowsy. Major Lewis—Major because he had served in the British Armed Forces in both World War I and World War II, but known to everyone

as simply Warnie—was sixty-eight. His brother was a week short of turning sixty-five.

The few words they exchanged were to be their last.

At five thirty, Warnie heard a sound and rushed in to find his brother lying unconscious at the foot of his bed. A few minutes later, Clive Staples Lewis—or Jack, as he was known to his friends and family—ceased breathing.

Today—fifty years after his quiet death in the brothers’ modest house just outside of Oxford—the man who many have called the most influential Christian writer of our times continues to live on in the books he left behind, continues to challenge and inspire. And the story of C. S. Lewis’s life—his journey from cynical atheism to joyous Christianity, his remarkable friendship with J. R. R. Tolkien, the legendary meetings with the writing group known as the Inklings, and his experience of deep love and deep heartbreak late in life—is as fascinating and as moving as any of the stories he wrote.

The Experience of “Joy”

As his fame as a writer spread, C. S. Lewis soon began receiving requests to recount the story of his spiritual journey, to tell how it was that he went from being a committed skeptic to being a committed Christian. Finally, in response to these appeals, in the late 1940s Lewis began a modest-length autobiographical work describing his life up to his conversion. Due to intervening work on *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* and the Chronicles of Narnia, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* was not published until some seven or eight years later, in September 1955, when Lewis was fifty-six years old.

One of the first things that Lewis makes clear in his autobiography is that by *Joy*—which Lewis spells with a capital *J*—he does not mean joy in the normal sense of gladness or elation.

He is using the word only because he cannot find a better one—at least not in English. At the very start of the story of his conversion, Lewis defines *Joy* to mean a special kind of intense longing he felt, beginning in childhood, for something he could not quite put his finger on.

Of course, it was a sensation of desire; but a desire for what? Lewis wonders. “Before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again” (16).

Although he did not know what this desire was for or where it came from, Lewis knew one thing: it was very powerful, so much so that he confesses to us that he finds it difficult to come up with words strong enough to describe it. One thing he can tell us is that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. There is bliss in this deep longing, he explains. It is also colored by a feeling of sadness or sorrow, but this sadness is a kind that we want.

Lewis took his title, *Surprised by Joy*, from a sonnet by the English poet William Wordsworth which begins with these two lines:

Surprised by joy—impatient as the wind
I turned to share the transport

Lewis uses Wordsworth’s first line on the title page of *Surprised by Joy* as an epigraph for the book. Like the wind, this Joy would come and go in Lewis’s life as it wished, sometimes appearing regularly, other times disappearing for long periods. When it did come, its presence was always fleeting, or as the sonnet says, impatient. But rather than leaving him sorrowful or distraught with its departure, the momentary experience left Lewis troubled, to his lifelong enrichment, with a dim sense of something that hovered just beyond what his consciousness could grasp—something unattainable but wonderful. He described this Joy that surprised him now and again as an unsatisfied desire which was more desirable than any other satisfaction.

In chapter 1 of his autobiography, Lewis concludes his initial description of this mysterious desire with an explicit warning, making it clear that if readers are not interested in the questions of what this strange longing was and where it came from, they need read no further. Why the warning? “The central story of my life is about nothing else,” Lewis explains (17).

The central story of my life is about nothing else. In chapter 10 of *The Problem of Pain*, a work published in 1940, relatively early in Lewis’s writing career, we find one of his most moving attempts to articulate what he meant by this experience of Joy.

You may have noticed that the books you really love are bound together by a secret thread. You know very well what is the common quality that makes you love them, though you cannot put it into words. . . . You have stood before some landscape, which seems to embody what you have been looking for all your life. . . . Even in your hobbies, has there not always been some secret attraction . . . , the smell of cut wood in the workshop or the clap-clap of water against the boat’s side? . . . That something which you were born desiring, and which beneath the flux of other desires and in all the momentary silences between the louder passions, night and day, year by year from childhood to old age, you are looking for, watching for, listening for. (130)

After pointing out various ways this deep longing may come to us—through cherished books, certain landscapes, and favorite hobbies—Lewis takes the next step, maintaining that none of these contain the true object of our desire. They are only the vehicles this special longing may come through.

“You have never *had* it,” Lewis writes (131). He goes on to explain that all of the things that have ever deeply possessed our souls have been but hints of it.

Tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really

become manifest—if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself—you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say, “Here at last is the thing I was made for.”

Lewis tells us that his life’s central story is about nothing else. But his use of an all-inclusive *you* here in these passages—though *you* cannot put it into words . . . that something which *you* were born desiring . . . *you* have never had it . . . *you* would know it—makes it clear that Lewis believes this is a longing we all have felt.

Lewis might say this is the central story of everyone’s life.

Lewis came to identify this longing—which haunted and disturbed him, in the best sense, down through the years—as a longing for heaven, our true home. At the end of *The Last Battle*, Lewis has Jewel the Unicorn give voice to these thoughts. Upon reaching the new Narnia, Jewel declares: “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now” (196).

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

If, as Lewis claimed, the central story of his life was his search for the object of this deep longing, then it makes sense also to make it the central story of a biography such as this one and to follow Lewis’s quest for the source of this mysterious Joy to its journey’s end.

This, then, is the story of Lewis’s quest to find his real country. And in Lewis’s quest, we may see reflected aspects of our own.

An Atheist Is Surprised

When Lewis tells us that he was surprised by Joy, surprised to find in himself a desire which nothing in this world could satisfy, he was surprised because, as a fervent materialist who

believed the physical world was all there is, he felt that this longing *should not exist*.

During Lewis's time, perhaps more so than today, there were a good number of writers and thinkers who might be called, for lack of a better term, *reluctant* atheists. After having been raised in the simple faith of their childhood, they would go off to the university and encounter the great minds of their day or, alternatively, to the battlefield and encounter the great horrors of their day, and these experiences would initiate a process that led them to the conclusion that the Christian story of a loving Father in heaven who sent his Son to save the world was only a fairy tale, something previous generations had made up long ago to help them feel better about their place in a frightening and meaningless universe. But rather than despising their childhood faith, these reluctant atheists then spent the rest of their days in melancholy, viewing their loss of faith with sadness and wishing that somehow they could still believe.

We meet one of these reluctant atheists in Matthew Arnold's famous poem "Dover Beach." There the speaker in the poem laments the retreat of the sea of faith and points out how bleak and bare he finds the world it has left behind.

We see a similar reluctant atheism in the narrator of Thomas Hardy's poem "The Oxen," who expresses nostalgia for the comforting, unsophisticated beliefs of his youth, a faith he no longer is able to embrace. In the final line, he reports that if invited to go see the miracle of the kneeling oxen on Christmas Eve, he would go in the gloom, hoping it might be so. But this gloom is far deeper than just the darkness of nighttime, and hoping here means the kind of wishing that knows, and regrets, that it will be otherwise.

The purpose in describing these reluctant atheists is simply to point out that Lewis was not one of them. In chapter 11 of *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis writes that a godless, materialistic universe

held out one great attraction to him: freedom from what he called the “transcendental Interferer” (172). For much of Lewis’s life, his most persistent wish when it came to God was a strong desire to be left alone. In this way his atheism, begun in earnest when he was around fourteen and lasting until around the time he turned thirty, was a great relief, not something he regretted.

Since Lewis was not a reluctant atheist but an enthusiastic and often arrogant one, we might go so far as to say that he was not only surprised by this Joy he experienced but also shocked by it. What origins could feelings like this have, and what purpose, for someone who so wholeheartedly embraced materialism?

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis makes the following proposition: “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists” (136). He then gives us several illustrations of this principle: Babies get hungry, and there is such a thing as food to satisfy this hunger. Ducklings want to swim, and there is such a thing as water. Humans feel sexual longing, and for this desire there is sex.

If, as Lewis believed until around the midpoint of his life, there is nothing beyond nature—nothing beyond what we can see, touch, taste, and smell—then where, Lewis asked, *did this longing that nothing in this world could satisfy come from?*

Toward the middle of *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis comments, “I was at this time living, like so many Atheists . . . in a whirl of contradictions” (115). A thoroughgoing materialist who felt an unearthly longing—this paradox is at the heart of his story.

1

Infant and Child

(1898 – 1908)

And every day there were what we called “the Green Hills”; that is, the low line of the Castlereagh Hills which we saw from the nursery windows. They were not very far off but they were, to children, quite unattainable. They taught me longing.

—*Surprised by Joy*, chapter 1

Belfast, 1898

Near the middle of chapter 7 of *The Magician’s Nephew*, we find a striking illustration that shows Jadis, the future White Witch of Narnia, straddling the roof of a horse-drawn cab, the reins in one hand, a whip in the other. The hansom, which is

barreling down a brick-paved street and about to crash into a gas streetlight, belongs to Frank, a working-class cabby and the future King Frank. In a second illustration that follows two pages later, we see the crowd which the mayhem has drawn: policemen with their old-fashioned bobby uniforms and nightsticks, errand boys on bicycles, the newspaper boy, the butcher's boy, and clusters of butlers and housemaids.

Both of these illustrations show us Great Britain at the turn of the century.

This time period, which seems almost a fairy tale setting to us today—the time of Peter Pan and Sherlock Holmes—was a time Lewis knew not from books but because it was the world he was born into. For Lewis, this world of horse travel, gas lights, brick-lined streets, and maids and butlers was not a fictional world, nor the world of previous generations, but his world, the world of his youth.

Clive Staples Lewis was born near the end of Queen Victoria's long reign in the final years of the nineteenth century, on November 29, 1898. In some ways the world he was born into resembled the world of the Middle Ages more than it does our world today.

Picture a world before space shuttles, airplanes, cars, or buses, a world where the vast majority of travel on land was done by foot, on horseback, or in a carriage or cart pulled by an animal. A world without the internet, cell phones, television, or even the radio. A world nearly everywhere still lit only by fire. Not only were there no computers—desktops, laptops, or tablets—to write with in 1898, but there were also no ballpoint pens. During Lewis's lifetime the fountain pen—a nib pen with an ink reservoir in the handle—would become widely available, but except for a relatively short time during his years as an undergraduate at Oxford, Lewis never used one.

Picture Lewis as a child, learning to write with a pen he had to dip into his inkpot every four or five words to refill. Except

for the metal point of the nib, his method of writing—a method used till the end of his life, during which he literally penned thirty-eight books, over two hundred essays, and thousands of letters—was more similar to that of a medieval monk copying manuscripts with a quill than today’s modern methods.

It should not really surprise us that Lewis sometimes may sound a bit dated—as he does, for example, when he has Peter and Edmund go around exclaiming “By Jove!” in the Narnia books. What is amazing is how current he remains after five decades, and even prophetic, addressing such topics as cruelty to animals, women’s body image, and the postmodern denial of absolute truth long before they became current.

In one way Belfast could be said to have regressed since 1898. During Lewis’s youth, Belfast was not just a thriving industrial city but also the world’s greatest shipyard. While today efforts are being made to reclaim its former glory, modern Belfast cannot match the golden age of manufacturing Lewis witnessed as a boy.

In the opening chapter of *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes the view of Belfast Lough—the site where the RMS *Titanic* was built. Lewis tells us that the story of his life begins in the “far-off days when Britain was the world’s carrier and the Lough was full of shipping” (11). He goes on to note that even when he was in his fifties, the sound of a ship’s horn in the night still evoked the distant memories of his boyhood.

Lewis was born in Belfast, *Ireland*—not Northern Ireland, as the region is called now—because in 1898 the island had not yet been partitioned into the Irish Republic in the south and the six-county region to the north that alone has remained a part of the UK. In one way modern-day Belfast still resembles the Belfast that Lewis was born into: strong divisions between Catholics and Protestants remain—although the hostility between the two factions has lessened. In chapter 14 of *Surprised*

by Joy, Lewis, who came from a Protestant family, tells of his first meeting with J. R. R. Tolkien, who was Roman Catholic, noting, “At my first coming into the world I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a Papist” (216). Perhaps because of the firsthand exposure to the “Troubles” between Catholics and Protestants in his childhood, later in life Lewis would write *Mere Christianity*, a work in which he intentionally put forth the beliefs which *all* Christians at all times have believed, and would speak out strongly against the divisions that continue to plague the Christian faith.

Besides the ongoing antagonism between its Christian factions, there is yet another way that modern-day Belfast resembles the Belfast of 1898, and this is the weather. As we will see, the inclement Irish weather featured prominently in the story of Lewis’s childhood.

St. Mark’s

Two physical structures are associated with Lewis’s beginnings in Belfast: St. Mark’s, the church his family attended (which through its membership in the Church of Ireland was part of the Anglican Communion); and Little Lea, the big house they moved to in 1905. St. Mark’s played a relatively small part in Lewis’s life. By contrast, Little Lea played a critical role, both in his childhood and in the kind of person he would later become.

The baptismal records of St. Mark’s Church, located in the Dundela section of Belfast, include an entry for an infant named Clive Staples. This entry tells us the basic facts about the Lewis family.

In the rectangular space for the child’s birth date is written “Nov 29 1898.” In the space for when baptized, we find “1899 Jan 29.” Also recorded is “No 186,” indicating that little Clive

was the 186th child to have been baptized since the new record book was begun. The first volume went from the church's origins in 1864 to 1889; the second covered 1889 to 1904. In the rectangular space for the parents' Christian names we see "Albert James & Florence Augusta." In the space for the name of the priest who conducted the baptism is written "Thos Hamilton."

The Reverend Thomas Hamilton was Flora Lewis's father, and so Lewis was baptized by his grandfather, who was the vicar of the church. Five years earlier, in 1894, the Reverend Hamilton had presided at the wedding ceremony at St. Mark's for his daughter and Albert. When the couple's first son was born in 1895, Flora's maiden name, Hamilton, was used for Warnie's middle name. Lewis would later use the pen name Clive Hamilton for his first two books of poetry.

The address recorded is "Dundela Villas, Strandtown," the family's first home, one of a pair of semidetached houses where both brothers were born, about two miles from the center of Belfast.

In the rectangular space for "Quality, Trade, or Profession" we find *Solicitor*, Albert's profession. Here, in lieu of employment, the father's "quality" would have been indicated—that is, if he was a gentleman or not. There is no space in this early record book for any similar information about the mother. Flora had graduated with a degree in mathematics from Queen's University, a rarity for the time. Like most married women of her day, she was a mother and homemaker.

If we look back several pages to entry number 108, we find the record of Warnie's baptism a few years before, on July 20, 1895. The large stone font where the brothers were baptized remains in use at the church today. Visitors to the church can see it and the stained glass window of Saints Luke, James, and Mark which Jack and Warnie donated in 1935 in memory of their parents.

Lewis makes it clear that the Christian teachings he was exposed to as a child at St. Mark's made neither a very big nor a very lasting impression on him. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis writes that during his youth "religious experiences did not occur at all" (7). He goes on to explain: "I was taught the usual things and made to say my prayers and in due time taken to church. I naturally accepted what I was told but I cannot remember feeling much interest in it."

In a letter dated February 15, 1946, after being asked to give a brief account of his spiritual life, Lewis begins: "I was baptized in the Church of Ireland (same as Anglican). My parents were not notably pious but went regularly to church and took me" (CLII, 702).

Lewis says little about his parents' faith and what beliefs they were able to pass on to him, possibly because there is not much to say. As we will see, when Lewis was young, he lost his mother to cancer. In *Surprised by Joy*, he confesses that he can say almost nothing from memory of his mother's religion. About Albert's faith we are given two sentences. In the first, Lewis notes that his father was rather high church and then tells us, "His approach to religion . . . was at the opposite pole from what later became my own" (7–8). In the second sentence Lewis writes that Albert delighted in the "charm of tradition" and the "verbal beauty" of the Bible and the Prayer Book and concludes by saying that it would have been difficult to find someone equally as intelligent as his father who "cared so little for metaphysics" (8).

Parents who were not notably pious but who went regularly to church. A father who loved the tradition and verbal beauty found in the services at St. Mark's but took no interest in metaphysics, and whose approach to religion was the opposite of the one Lewis himself took later in life. In chapter 10 of *Surprised by Joy* Lewis will relate how at age sixteen he was confirmed

at St. Mark's and made his first Communion, despite being an atheist at the time in a state of total disbelief. He reports that it would have been impossible to discuss his objections to being confirmed with his father, because Albert's answer to him would not have been based on Jack's lack of belief in the Sacrament itself but instead on "the beauty of the Authorized Version, the beauty of the Christian tradition and sentiment and character" (162).

It might be tempting to try to read between the lines here to find something Lewis does not directly say about the faith of his father. These comments expand his claim that religious experiences played no part in his childhood and that beyond accepting what he was told, he had little connection to matters of faith.

As a young boy, Lewis made several attempts to keep a diary, none very long-lived. Then in 1922, when he was an undergraduate student at Oxford, Lewis started a new diary, which he continued for five years. This diary was made public under the title *All My Road Before Me* in 1991, twenty-eight years after Lewis's death. An entry from this diary, an entry Lewis wrote after his childhood had passed, may offer a window on the kind of conversations Albert had with Jack and Warnie—or, in this case, did not have—about matters of faith.

Jack and Warnie had gone home for Christmas, and in this entry written at Little Lea, dated December 25, 1922, we read:

We were awakened early by my father to go to the Communion Service. It was a dark morning with a gale blowing and some very cold rain. We tumbled out and got under way. As we walked down to church we started discussing the time of sunrise; my father saying rather absurdly that it must have risen already, or else it wouldn't be light.

In church it was intensely cold. Warnie offered to keep his coat on. My father expostulated and said, "Well at least you won't keep it on when you go up to the Table." Warnie asked

why not and was told it was “most disrespectful.” I couldn’t help wondering why. But Warnie took it off to save trouble. (158)

While this diary entry belongs to a somewhat later period in his life, in chapter 7 of *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis gives us another glimpse of his strained relationship with his father—particularly concerning spiritual matters. There Lewis explains that while at Wynyard School, a time when he was trying to live as a Christian, he wrote out a set of rules for himself and put them in his pocket. On one of the holiday breaks when Jack returned to Little Lea, his father noticed his pockets bulging with all sorts of papers and, not liking how they pulled his son’s coat out of shape, began removing them. “I would have died rather than let him see my list of good resolutions,” Lewis writes (120). Somehow without Albert noticing, young Jack managed to slip his list of Christian rules into the fireplace, preferring to burn them before allowing his father to read them.

Two further windows may help to fill out our picture of Lewis’s childhood beliefs. The first is a short sentence found in *Letters to an American Lady*. Lewis’s correspondent, an elderly widow from Washington, DC, wrote to him worried about a young person whose religious education was being neglected. In a letter dated September 19, 1954, we may hear hints of Lewis’s own childhood as he writes, “Remember how much religious education has exactly the opposite effect to that which was intended” (32).

A second window comes from a well-known passage in the essay “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” where Lewis explains how he first came to write his famous seven-volume series of fairy tales, the *Chronicles of Narnia*. There Lewis recounts:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told

one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices, almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? (47)

From this passage we can conclude that when Lewis was exposed to the gospel as a child, it was presented to him in a way that did not communicate its true power, its real potency, and so paralyzed his religious development for a long time.

Would Lewis say that as a young person he was a follower of Christ? The answer is not given until later, after he left home to go to boarding school, and then only briefly. He concludes this section about his early spirituality in *Surprised by Joy* by telling us that his childhood was “not in the least other-worldly” (8). Twenty-five pages later, in chapter 2 of *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes “the most important thing” that happened to him at Wynyard (33), the first of the four boarding schools he would attend. Lewis became a student there in September 1908, when he was nine, and left in July 1910, when he was eleven. “There first I became an effective believer,” Lewis writes.

The term *effective believer* suggests that at Wynyard Jack became more than a nominal Christian. He goes on to describe what this meant for him, writing, “I began seriously to pray and to read my Bible and to attempt to obey my conscience” (34). And in stating that he *began* these practices at Wynyard, Lewis tells us that he was not doing these things previously, at least not in a serious way. In the letter of February 15, 1946, mentioned earlier, he goes on to say, “I abandoned all belief in Christianity at about the age of fourteen” (CLII, 702). From these statements it would seem that as a young person Lewis had some Christian

beliefs and attempted to live out those beliefs, but only after he left Little Lea and only for a while.

But again we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Although born and baptized as Clive, Lewis soon took a disliking to the name his parents had given him. Sometime around the age of four, he marched up to his mother and, pointing at himself, declared that he was now to be known as “Jacksie.” This name, later shortened to Jacks and then to just Jack, became the only name he would answer to. In his book *Jack’s Life*, Douglas Gresham, Lewis’s stepson, provides the following background on why Lewis chose this name: “It was actually because of a small dog that he was fond of that he picked the name Jacksie, which was what the dog was called. It was run over (probably by a horse and cart as there were almost no cars in the time and place where he was a child), and Jack, as he later became known, just took the name for himself” (2).

Years later Lewis would begin *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* with the famous line: “Once there was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it” (3). With the similar sounds in *Eustace* and *Lewis* and the shared initials C and S, readers might see this as the author’s partially veiled critique of his own given name. As we will see later, Clive Staples Lewis and Eustace Clarence Scrubb shared other traits as well, ones that went beyond the names they were given.

By one count, that of Chip Duncan, who made the documentary *The Magic Never Ends*, there are only thirty-eight photographs of Lewis in the world. Most are in black and white, the only kind that existed for much of Lewis’s lifetime. All the early ones were taken by a professional photographer at his studio or at Little Lea, since personal cameras were virtually nonexistent then. Given his celebrity which began in the 1940s—Lewis was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on September 8, 1947—and continued to his death in 1963, it is surprising that

there are no moving images. The more famous photos are readily available by doing an online search for “C. S. Lewis.”

In the few photos we have of Lewis as an infant, we see an otherwise unremarkable, curly haired baby dressed in conventional baby clothes. But in one picture of him as a little boy, around the time he decided he was no longer to be called Clive, we see him standing alone dressed in a sailor suit, what must have been a normal outfit for a young boy at the time. But what is standing next to him is curious. Young Jacksie is holding the string to a toy donkey, and riding on the donkey is Father Christmas.

Did these two toys come together as a set, or did Lewis combine them—in the way that he would later combine divergent elements in Narnia? Was it Lewis who picked Father Christmas from all his toys to appear with him in the picture? Was the young Lewis already making up imaginary stories that featured Father Christmas as he played with the toy figure?

In his book *The Most Reluctant Convert*, David Downing suggests that the episode of Lewis choosing his own name is revealing. “This same boy,” Downing writes, “who chose to define himself at the age of four, apart from the expectations and desires of those around him, would spend the rest of his life defining himself, and his world, differently from the conventions that he had inherited” (19). Whether writing fiction in a style the world had never seen, or deciding for himself—as an Oxford don and a layman—how public he should be about his Christian faith, or choosing late in life to marry an American divorcée, Lewis certainly would not hesitate to break from inherited conventions when he felt the need.

They Taught Me Longing

Good parents, good food, and a garden large enough to play in—this is how Lewis summarizes his early childhood in *Surprised*

by Joy. He then lists two additional blessings from this time at Dundela Villas, before the move to the new house during his seventh year. The first blessing was the family's nurse, Lizzie Endicott, a working-class woman of local Irish stock who Lewis reports was as simply good as a human could be.

The other blessing was his brother.

"Though three years my senior, he never seemed to be an elder brother," Lewis writes (6). From the very start, he goes on to state, they were more than allies.

They were confederates.

If *Surprised by Joy* is the most important source of primary information we have about Lewis's early life, it could be argued that the second most important primary source is a lengthy essay written by Warren Lewis to appear at the front of *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, which was first published in 1966, two and a half years after Jack's death. This "Memoir of C. S. Lewis" opens with Warnie's comment that his earliest memories of his brother are of a "vociferous disturber" of the domestic peace and a "rival claimant" to their mother's attention (21). This initial stage quickly passed, and Warnie writes that during their childhood the brothers laid the foundations of an intimate friendship which became the greatest happiness of his life and lasted unbroken until Jack's death.

In the second paragraph, the memoir takes a curious turn. Looking back over his brother's life and all his accomplishments, Warnie notes, "I feel that one particular and even trivial circumstance in our early life together needs some emphasis" (21). What was this trivial element which played such a significant role in his younger brother's development? What could this circumstance be which Warnie claims has been overlooked and thus needs, as he says, greater emphasis? "I refer," he writes, "to the wetness of Irish weather, and the nervousness of the parents of that time about damp and exposure."

Warnie explains how the frequent Irish rain and the prevalent fear of exposure was such an influence.

By the standards of present-day childhood in England, we spent an extraordinary amount of our time shut up indoors. We would gaze out of our nursery window at the slanting rain and the grey skies, and there, beyond a mile or so of sodden meadow, we would see the dim line of the Castlereagh Hills—our world’s limit, a distant land, strange and unattainable. But we always had pencils, paper, chalk and paintboxes, and this recurring imprisonment gave us occasion and stimulus to develop the habit of creative imagination. . . . And so, in circumstance that might have been merely dull and depressing, my brother’s gifts began to develop; and it may not be fanciful to see, in that childhood staring out to unattainable hills, some first beginnings of a vision and viewpoint that ran through the work of his maturity. (21)

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis says nothing about the rain but does mention the Castlereagh Hills the brothers could see from their window at the Dundela Villas house. “They were not very far off,” he writes, “but they were, to children, quite unattainable” (7). He concludes with the observation, “They taught me longing.”

And this was, Lewis notes, before he had turned six years old.

Besides this experience of longing evoked by the distant hills, Lewis records another defining experience in *Surprised by Joy* which took place during this period at the Dundela Villas house, an experience that modern readers both may and may not be able to relate to. One morning young Jack was playing inside and his brother came in, carrying the lid from a container for cookies—the lid of a biscuit tin, Lewis calls it. Warnie had covered the lid with moss and then added flowers and twigs to make it into sort of a garden in miniature.

What Warnie’s beautiful, little toy garden did was to give Lewis a whole new view of the natural world. He describes the effect it had on him: “It made me aware of nature—not,

indeed, as a storehouse of forms and colors but as something cool, dewy, fresh, exuberant” (7).

Lewis goes on to state that this impression became a lasting one that remained forever in his memory. Then he tells us that though he did not realize it until much later, this freshness and exuberance was for him a connection with the goodness of creation that still abides as a remnant and a reminder of an unfallen world. Lewis finishes his account of the incident with this statement: “As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother’s toy garden” (7).

Few people today have discovered Joy in a toy garden constructed in the lid of a biscuit tin, as Jack did, but they may have had an experience of the sacramental that can be found in nature, a fleeting sense of something wonderful, beyond what can be seen or touched.

Yet having a pleasant experience of nature is different from experiencing something in nature which points to something that transcends the natural world. Much later, in his *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis would explain the difference:

To say that God created Nature, while it brings God and Nature into relation, also separates them. What makes and what is made must be two, not one. Thus the doctrine of Creation in one sense empties Nature of divinity. . . . But in another sense the same doctrine which empties Nature of her divinity also makes her an index, a symbol, a manifestation, of the Divine. . . . It is surely just because the natural objects are no longer taken to be themselves Divine that they can now be magnificent symbols of Divinity. . . . The doctrine of Creation leaves Nature full of manifestations which show the presence of God, and created energies which serve Him. (80–81)

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis makes a final observation about his experience with Warnie’s toy garden: “That was the first beauty I ever knew” (7). Here in the early pages of his autography,

he does not expand on the meaning of this beauty. Perhaps he does not analyze it because, at this point in his life, young Jacksie would not have thought much about what was behind this experience. But later in life, Lewis would have much to say about the beauty we find in nature—what its source is, what it points to, and why it moves us so deeply. He addresses all these topics perhaps nowhere as powerfully or as compellingly as in a passage from “The Weight of Glory.” In it we can find Lewis’s expression of the meaning behind his toy-garden experience.

Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off . . . is not mere neurotic fantasy, but the truest index of our real situation. . . . We want . . . something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. . . . We do not want merely to see beauty. . . . We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. (42)

In the very last chapter of the very last book he would write, *Letters to Malcolm*—which was published after his death—Lewis thinks back to his earliest memories, back to his first experience of beauty and how the memory of it had a lifelong effect on him. Borrowing a phrase from a poem by his friend Owen Barfield, Lewis writes, “The dullest of us knows how memory can transfigure; how often some momentary glimpse of beauty in boyhood is ‘a whisper which memory will warehouse as a shout’” (122).

This whisper of beauty in Warnie’s biscuit-lid garden would become a shout in Lewis’s memory, an unforgettable pointer to something, or Someone, beyond nature.

Little Lea

In April 1905, Albert and Flora Lewis moved with their growing boys into a bigger house which reflected Albert’s rising income

and the Lewises' rising status in Belfast society. They named their new home—which Albert had specially though inexpertly built near the more open outskirts of town—Little Lea.

In *Surprised by Joy*, we are told that the move, made when Lewis was six, was the first great change in his life, so life-changing that Lewis maintains that the new house is almost a major character in his story. In his description of the effect that the rambling, three-story house had on him, we find one of the most quoted passages Lewis ever wrote: “I am the product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles. Also of endless books” (10).

Often when this passage is cited, readers are immediately pointed to the “endless books” in Lewis’s concluding element—books, as he describes, in the study, the drawing room, the cloakroom, and the bedroom; books two deep in the great bookcase; books piled on the landing and even higher in the attic. Certainly books featured prominently as vehicles of the Joy that Lewis would experience. But before turning to those books, we first need to pause and see those long corridors at Little Lea and look into those empty sunlit rooms. We need to go upstairs with young Jack and hear the indoor silences broken only by the faint gurgle of cisterns and pipes, and, especially, we need to stop and listen to the sound of the wind as it swooshes under the tiles. There was something about the mysterious, tranquil, eerie solitude in the new house that not only provided the setting for Lewis’s deep longing but actually helped evoke it.

Without the move to Little Lea, there would still have been experiences of Joy in Lewis’s early life, but perhaps they would not have been so strong nor have come so often.

In his autobiography, Lewis tells us that when he was young, Little Lea seemed to him more like a city than a house. We

find Lewis's nod to his boyhood home in his description of the Professor's house in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. In chapter 1 the narrator tells us, "It was the sort of house that you never seem to come to the end of, and it was full of unexpected places" (6). The four Pevensies find that the house has many spare rooms, including one that is "quite empty except for one big wardrobe." The children also discover that—like Little Lea—the mysterious house has rooms and rooms lined with books.

All great writers began as great readers. And young Jack was no exception. Lewis tells us in his autobiography that he was allowed to read any book he wanted to from the seemingly endless supply at Little Lea. He points out that being able to find a new book was as easy and as certain as walking into a field and finding a new blade of grass. During the recurrent rainy afternoons, he read volume after volume, books that were suitable for a child and, as he tells us, books that were most emphatically not.

The young Lewis brothers claimed one of the many attic spaces explored in solitude to become their dayroom, a remote hideaway which under normal circumstances was off-limits to everyone else. They named it the "little end room." "There I kept my pen and inkpot," Lewis records in *Surprised by Joy*. "Here my first stories were written" (12–13).

In his "Memoir of C. S. Lewis," Warnie offers this description of Little Lea's mysterious nooks and crannies and the room they staked out for themselves:

The new house itself was a child's delight, by reason of its atrociously uneconomical design: on the top floor, cupboard-like doors opened into huge, dark, wasted spaces under the roof, tunnel-like passages through which children could crawl from one space into another. . . . Best of all, we had our own dayroom in the attic. . . . In this glorious privacy, . . . our secret life flourished wonderfully. (23)

Years later Lewis would include a passage in *The Magician's Nephew*—a story set during the same time period when he and Warnie were boys at Little Lea—which calls to mind both the rainy days which kept the brothers indoors so often and the mysterious spaces they discovered under the roof of Little Lea. We are told that Digory and Polly's adventures began “chiefly because it was one of the wettest and coldest summers there had been for years” (8). Then Lewis's narrator explains:

That drove them to do indoor things: you might say, indoor exploration. It is wonderful how much exploring you can do with a stump of a candle in a big house. . . . Polly had discovered long ago that if you opened a certain little door in the box-room attic of her house you would find the cistern and a dark place behind it which you could get into by a little careful climbing. . . . Polly had used the bit of the tunnel just beside the cistern as a smugglers' cave. . . . Here she kept a cash-box containing various treasures, and a story she was writing and usually a few apples.

One important benefit of the move to Little Lea had nothing to do with the house itself. Warnie reports in his memoir: “Our new house, ‘Little Lea,’ was on the borderline—suburb one way, open hilly farmland the other. We both had bicycles, and in these golden years before school, Jack developed a passionate and lifelong devotion to County Down” (23).

There is a famous picture, taken in 1908, of the two brothers standing on a country lane proudly holding their bikes. Later in life, fellow Ulsterman David Bleakley would record Lewis telling him, “Heaven is Oxford lifted and placed in the middle of County Down” (53). Lewis would later turn to the Irish countryside he explored as a child as his model for the landscape of Narnia, much as his friend J. R. R. Tolkien would base the Shire on memories of his boyhood home in rural Sarehole, England.

Soon after the move to Little Lea, Warnie, who had turned ten, was sent off to boarding school in England. Although his brother still came home for vacations and summers, Jack was now alone for much of the time. He was taught French and Latin by his mother, and all other subjects by his governess, Annie Harper. In his autobiography, Lewis tells us that he was an intolerable chatterbox at this time in his life, talking with his parents, his grandfather (who had moved in with them), the governess, the maids, and the gardener. Yet despite all these people that he could and did talk with, he also notes that his life was increasingly one of solitude, during which he would do two things: read stories and create his own, complete with illustrations.

Except for the surroundings, which are now quite built up, Little Lea stands today at 76 Circular Drive on Belfast's north-east side much as it did when it served as the Lewis family residence. The steps leading to the front entrance are still flanked by the low brick walls which can be clearly seen in the well-known Lewis family photo, and the walls are still topped with the same large decorative balls. In the photograph, Warnie is seen slouching against one of them, hands in his pockets. Unlike St. Mark's, which welcomes Lewis fans who make their way there from all over the world, Little Lea is privately owned and not open to the public. To tour the inside of a home Lewis lived in, visitors must travel to Headington, England, and the Kilns, the house he resided in for thirty-three years, from 1930 until his death.

Three Seminal Experiences of Joy—Like Prior Experiences or Something New?

Today when people try to read the personal narratives of famous Christian mystics from long ago—figures such as St. John of

the Cross, Julian of Norwich, and Hildegard von Bingen—they sometimes find the accounts of their mystical experiences confusing and, at times, almost incomprehensible.

Lewis's account, too, can sometimes be a bit perplexing.

During the first few years after the move to Little Lea in 1905, Lewis again found himself surprised by the experience of Joy. He records three specific instances in his autobiography—and implies more went unrecorded. What is unclear is whether he saw these experiences at Little Lea as being of the same type as his early experiences of Warnie's toy garden and the distant Castlereagh Hills or as the beginning of something more profound. We can find evidence for both of these conclusions, but perhaps it does not really matter all that much.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that the first of these encounters of Joy after the move to Little Lea was actually, as Lewis explains in his autobiography, “the memory of a memory” (16). As Lewis writes *Surprised by Joy* in his fifties, he tells the story of a summer's day when he was standing by a flowering currant bush at Little Lea when he was six, seven, or eight, and suddenly something—perhaps the bush, perhaps something else—caused him to remember the experience of the toy garden in the biscuit tin back at Dundela Villas when he was four or five. Lewis comments that this memory from his family's old house seemed like it was coming not from just a few years before but from centuries earlier.

How does Lewis describe this desire, this experience of Joy which he felt standing by the currant bush as the memory of the toy-garden experience came over him? He first tells us, “Milton's ‘enormous bliss’ of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to ‘enormous’) comes somewhere near it” (16). In alluding to Milton's use of this phrase in book 5 of *Paradise Lost*, Lewis wants us to think of a bliss which transcends all conventional norms or measurements. He also tells us that this enormous

bliss was *not* a longing for Warnie’s biscuit lid filled with moss. But what it was a longing for, Lewis does not say.

Lewis concludes his account of the experience with such a bold claim that here we must turn to his own words: “Before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. It had taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison” (16).

Does Lewis really mean that the extraordinary experience he took such care to describe earlier—the toy-garden incident—was truly insignificant in comparison to his *memory* of it by the currant bush years later? And not only that, but insignificant compared to *everything else that had ever happened to him*? Perhaps. Perhaps that is the only way to put into words how experiences like these feel. Many years later, in an essay titled “The Long Way Round,” an American named Joy Davidman—who after a long journey became a Christian and, later, after a different kind of journey across the Atlantic, also became Mrs. Joy Lewis—made a similar claim in her account of a mysterious experience that changed her life: “All my defenses—the walls of arrogance and coxsureness and self-love behind which I hid from God—went down momentarily and God came in. . . . There was a Person with me in that room, directly present to my consciousness—a Person so real that all my previous life was by comparison a mere shadow play” (23).

In describing his unearthly experiences in chapter 1 of his autobiography, Lewis does not use the word God—not at this point. But note the similarities between the ways Lewis describes his three encounters and the account Joy Davidman gives in conclusion: “I myself was more alive than I had ever been; it was like waking from sleep. So intense a life cannot be endured

long by flesh and blood; we must ordinarily take our life watered down, diluted as it were, by time and space and matter. My perception of God lasted perhaps half a minute” (23).

The second special experience of longing which Lewis tells us about in *Surprised by Joy* was prompted by the Beatrix Potter book *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*. “It troubled me,” he writes, “with what I can only describe as the Idea of Autumn” (16). He points out that although he loved all the Potter books, he did not get this special feeling from any of the others—only *Squirrel Nutkin*. This Idea of Autumn, Lewis reports, was also an experience of intense desire, one that he admits came as a surprise and had the same sense of “incalculable importance” as his experience by the currant bush (17).

The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin was published in August 1903, three months before Jack’s fifth birthday. Like Potter’s first book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, which had come out a year earlier in 1902, it was an instant success in England and Ireland. That said, readers of *Surprised by Joy* who search out *Squirrel Nutkin* because of its association with Lewis may be baffled as to why this book affected him so deeply. Besides telling us that it evoked the Idea of Autumn, Lewis does not elaborate on what it was in the book that affected him so. Perhaps it was the story’s setting which moved him. Perhaps it was the illustrations—as he singles them out for a brief mention in chapter 3 of *An Experiment in Criticism* and also in the earlier manuscript version of *Surprised by Joy* (which Walter Hooper has titled “Early Prose Joy”). In *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, we find this description which offers a glimpse of the season: “One autumn when the nuts were ripe, and the leaves on the hazel bushes were golden and green—Nutkin and Twinkleberry and all the other little squirrels came out of the wood, and down to the edge of the lake” (6). Elsewhere we find further descriptions associated with autumn and the outdoors: a

thin thread of smoke from a wood fire, yellow and scarlet oak apples, a crooked chestnut tree.

Whatever it was that evoked his experience of Joy, Lewis tells us that he returned to the book again and again, not to possess or gratify the desire, but to reawaken it.

This Idea of Autumn and its association with Joy never left Lewis. In a letter written to Arthur Greeves two decades later in October 1929, Lewis comments on a sense which he had more and more with each passing autumn and describes having, during a walk into Oxford, glimpses of “it”—the correspondents’ name at the time for the poignant longing Lewis would later call Joy. He tells Arthur:

Today I worked in the morning and afternoon and walked into town. . . . The real autumn tang in the air had begun. There was one of those almost white skies with a touch of frosty red over the town, and the beginnings of lovely coloring in the college’s garden. I love the big kitchen garden there. There is something very attractive about rows of pots—and an old man potting—and greenhouses and celery trenches. . . . I saw both a squirrel and a fat old rat in Addison’s walk, and had glimpses of “it.”

I think almost more every year in autumn I get the sense, just as the mere nature and voluptuous life of the world is dying, of something else coming awake. You know the feeling, of course, as well as I do. I wonder is it significant—in stories nymphs slip out of the tree just as the ordinary life of the wood is settling down for the night. Does the death of the natural always mean the birth of the spiritual? (*CLI*, 831–32)

Readers who may not be moved by *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* may have been moved by a crisp, clear autumn day—moved in a way that went beyond the merely physical qualities that were present. Lewis remained a Beatrix Potter fan all his life. In a letter dated November 30, 1942, he writes of her “secure place among the masters of English prose” and confesses that he and

Tolkien had often toyed with the idea of making a pilgrimage to visit her (*CLII*, 538).

The third of these seminal experiences of Joy at Little Lea came to Lewis through lines found in a long work by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow titled *The Saga of King Olaf*. Just as before, when Lewis noted that he was not deeply affected by any other Beatrix Potter books, only *Squirrel Nutkin*, here again he records in *Surprised by Joy* that he was fond of the work only in a causal or shallow way, for its story and strong rhythmic verse. But then he tells us that when he turned a page and came across the opening lines from Longfellow's translation of "Tegner's Drapa," he was suddenly lifted up into "huge regions of northern sky" (17). These are the lines Lewis read:

I heard a voice that cried,
Balder the beautiful
Is dead, is dead—

What it was about these lines and no others that moved him, Lewis does not say, and perhaps did not know. He confesses that as a young boy reading the poem, he knew nothing about Balder. It is safe to say that not many Lewis fans will be moved in the same way that Lewis was by these lines, but a few years later Lewis would become friends with a neighbor named Arthur Greeves, mentioned earlier, who shared his passion for Norse legends. Seven chapters later in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes their common response to H. A. Guerber's *Myths of the Norsemen*, as he and Greeves discovered that they both "knew the stab of Joy and that, for both, the arrow was shot from the North" (130).

If readers today find it hard to relate to Lewis's account of being transported to huge regions of northern sky by Longfellow's lament for Balder, they may be moved, and moved quite deeply, by the mysterious longing found in Lewis's own story

The Horse and His Boy. In this Chronicle of Narnia, published in 1954, Lewis tells about a young boy named Shasta who is inexplicably interested in everything that lies to the North and often finds himself eagerly looking to the North, until one day he meets a talking horse named Bree.

“I’ve been longing to go to the North all my life,” Shasta tells him in a secret conversation (14).

“Of course you have,” Bree responds, for to the North lies Narnia, the land where Shasta belongs, his real country.

“Narnia and the North!” becomes their rallying cry, a phrase that may transport today’s readers in perhaps much the same ways as “Balder the beautiful is dead” transported young Jack as he sat reading in the little end room of Little Lea.

It is after describing these three mysterious and fleeting experiences of Joy at Little Lea—the memory of Warnie’s toy garden while standing at a currant bush, the Idea of Autumn evoked by *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, and the uplift into huge regions of northern sky brought on through lines by Longfellow—that Lewis makes the statement, “The central story of my life is about nothing else.” George Sayer, who was first Lewis’s student, then later his close friend and biographer, suggests that these episodes were mystical experiences of the presence of God and notes how they arose from such “seemingly incongruous events” (52). Then Sayer points out, “Incongruous, that is, until one remembers that the Spirit ‘blows where it listeth.’”

We could say that the Spirit blew not only *where* and *when* it desired in Lewis’s youth but also *how* it willed to—in his case, *not* through the Sunday school lessons and stained-glass images at St. Mark’s, as might have been expected. As we will learn, what later would link all of Lewis’s incongruous surprises of Joy was what—or Who—was behind them.

Taking a different tack, we could say that Lewis’s experiences of Joy were also linked by a certain kind of receptivity in

the young Jack, an openness that stayed with him all his life. Biographer Alan Jacobs suggests that Lewis's most significant defining characteristic was his willingness to be enchanted—a profound openness to delight joined with the sense that there is “more to the world than meets the jaundiced eye” (xxi). Jacobs makes the case that later in life Lewis's work would be connected by a desire to reverse or undo the “disenchantment of the world” (188), to break the powerful spell that causes us to see the physical world as nothing more than a meaningless mass of molecules and atoms—to think that a star is just a ball of gas or that a flowering currant bush is just a bunch of petals, leaves, and branches.

Much later, in *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis would write that special holy places should serve to remind us that “every bush (could we but perceive it) is a Burning Bush” (75), a reference to not only the burning bush that Moses saw but perhaps also to the currant bush at Little Lea. Lewis then offers a moving proposition: “We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate.” So what is our role? What need we do to be surprised by Joy? Lewis describes our task this way: “The real labor is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.”

The answer we see modeled in Lewis's life is that we must remain receptive.

As Lewis shifts from describing these three seminal experiences of Joy to his next major focus in his autobiography, the death of his mother, he makes a statement intended to serve as a transition but which is interesting for something it tells us. He writes, “I cannot be absolutely sure whether the things I have just been speaking of happened before or after the great loss which befell our family and to which I must now turn” (18). The

death of Flora Lewis when Jack was only nine, a staggering blow that will be examined in the next chapter, would mark the end of his childhood and the start of his boyhood. When he tells us that these encounters might have happened after or before her death, Lewis makes it clear that not even the life or the death of his mother could separate him from these stabs of Joy.