

MARK A. NOLL

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM

KAREN JOHNSON, KIRK D. FARNEY,

AND AMY BLACK

C. S. Lewis

IN

AMERICA

READINGS
AND RECEPTION,
1935-1947



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INTRODUCTION

MARK A. NOLL

IMAGINE THAT IN the 1930s and 1940s transatlantic air travel had been as routine as it is now. Imagine also that C. S. Lewis had journeyed to the United States to converse in person with those who were reading his books on this side of the Atlantic. Through 1942, it was only a small number of mostly academics and reviewers for the nation's newspapers of record. But after early 1943 and the American publication of *The Screwtape Letters*, that number grew rapidly and from every intellectual, religious, and cultural corner of the land. These readers in America included well-regarded literary scholars, theologians, historians, and philosophers; figures destined for renown, such as Thomas Merton and W. H. Auden; masters of the radio, such as Alister Cooke, who would later become a fixture on public television; reviewers for the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Saturday Review*, and other well-positioned periodicals; and many Roman Catholics, many mainline Protestants, and a few—but only a few—fundamentalists and evangelicals.

In actual, as opposed to imagined, history, we know only a little about how Lewis responded to what his American readers wrote about his works.¹ Yet we know in detail how Americans from these various

¹For some of those rare instances, see page 10n1, 25n31, 34n46, 56n3, 57n6, 81n44, 107n21, 113n30.

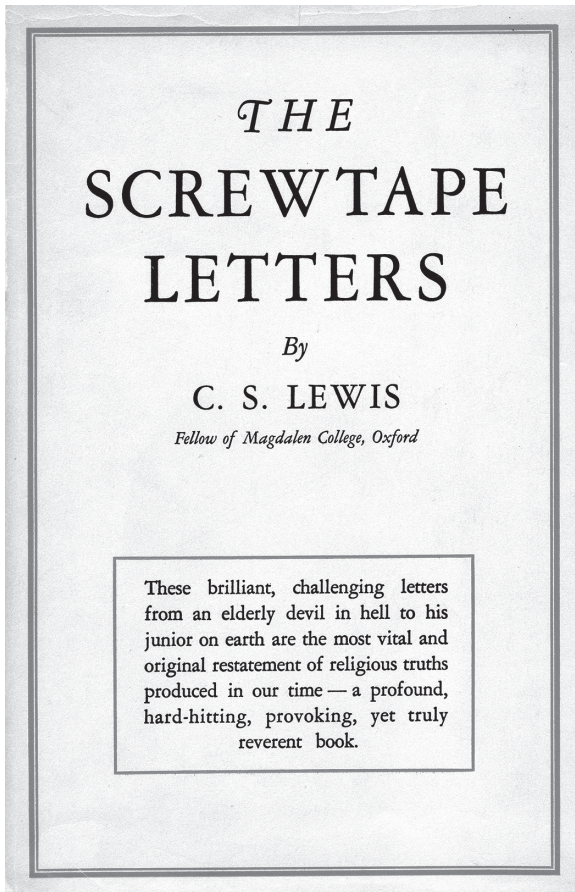


Figure I.1. C. S. Lewis, who had been noticed by only a small circle of academics, gained a widespread American readership almost immediately after Macmillan brought out an American edition of *The Screwtape Letters* in February 1943.

constituencies regarded his books because of the many reviews they published—at first a steady trickle and then, after *The Screwtape Letters*, a rapidly expanding deluge of critical engagement.

This book examines that engagement from before the *New York Times* published the first American review on December 8, 1935, through 1947, the year that *Time* magazine celebrated Lewis with a

cover portrait and laudatory article in its September 8 issue. The logic for treating this span of years as a period unto itself is twofold.

For Lewis, these were the years when he first gained a significant audience in the United Kingdom and the United States. But they came *before* the stratospheric recognition that followed the publication in 1950 of the first Narnia tale (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) and the appearance in 1952 of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis's apology and exposition of the Christian faith, which he assembled from pamphlets of radio talks he had delivered during the Second World War.²

The years 1935 through 1947 also mark a distinct period for showing what American critical reactions to Lewis reveal about Americans. This was an era dominated by pervasive national crises—first the Depression, then World War II, and then uncertainties after the war about charting a national course as the world's dominant superpower. These same years also witnessed a crucial cultural transition—from a past in which Christian values could be more or less taken for granted by wide swaths of the American people to a future in which those values became increasingly contested.³

In trying to make sense out of critical reactions to C. S. Lewis in the years surrounding the Second World War, this book follows outstanding recent studies by K. Alan Snyder, George Marsden, and Stephanie Derrick. By researching how, when, where, and why Lewis's writings became so popular, these books have greatly helped to understand the remarkable extent of the C. S. Lewis phenomenon.⁴

²Lewis's ongoing popularity is suggested by the fact that HarperOne leads a host of American publishers in keeping well over one hundred editions of over a dozen of his books in print. On Amazon.com's bestseller lists, various sets of the Narnia tales regularly rank in the top ten for "Children's Christian Faith Books," as do several versions of *Mere Christianity* (print, audio, and Kindle) in the top ten for "Christian Apologetics." The only Lewis work from before 1947 that ranks as high on these lists is *The Screwtape Letters*, which has long been a fixture at number one in "Christian Classics and Allegories."

³Awareness of that transition is discussed in the last part of chapter three.

⁴K. Alan Snyder, *America Discovers C. S. Lewis: His Profound Impact* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); George M. Marsden, *C. S. Lewis's Mere Christianity: A Biography* (Princeton,



Figure I.2. This image (ca. 1940) shows a considerably younger Lewis than the individual whom later photographs would make so well known throughout the whole world.

C. S. Lewis in America goes further by differentiating in considerable detail among the various American groups that responded to Lewis in the first years of his public visibility: first, the many Roman Catholics who wrote about Lewis and his works; second, Lewis's reception in journals, magazines, and newspapers intended for general audiences or the academic world; and third, responses to Lewis from

NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Stephanie L. Derrick, *The Fame of C. S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Table 1. Publication of C. S. Lewis's Books in the United States, 1935–1947

TITLE	FIRST AMERICAN PUBLICATION	FIRST BRITISH PUBLICATION
Literary Scholarship		
<i>The Allegory of Love</i>	1958 (Oxford University Press, NY)	1936 (Clarendon)
<i>Rehabilitations and Other Essays</i>	1939, March 23 (Oxford University Press, London & New York)	
<i>The Personal Heresy</i> , with E. M. W. Tillyard	1939, April 27 (Oxford University Press, London & New York)	
<i>A Preface to Paradise Lost</i>	1942, October 8 (Oxford University Press, London & New York)	
as editor, <i>George MacDonald: An Anthology</i>	1947 (Macmillan)	1946 (Geoffrey Bles)
Imaginative Writing		
<i>The Pilgrim's Regress</i>	1935, October (Sheed & Ward)	1933 (J. M. Dent)
<i>The Screwtape Letters</i>	1943, February 16 (Macmillan)	1942, February 9 (Geoffrey Bles)
<i>Out of the Silent Planet</i>	1943, September 28 (Macmillan)	1938, September 23 (John Lane The Bodley Head)
<i>Perelandra</i>	1944, April 11 (Macmillan)	1943, April 20 (John Lane The Bodley Head)
<i>The Great Divorce</i>	1946, February 26 (Macmillan)	1946, January 14 (Geoffrey Bles/Centenary Press)
<i>That Hideous Strength</i>	1946, May 21 (Macmillan)	1945, August 16 (John Lane The Bodley Head)
Christian Exposition		
<i>The Case for Christianity (US) / Broadcast Talks (UK)</i>	1943, September 7 (Macmillan)	1942, July 13 (Geoffrey Bles/Centenary Press)
<i>The Problem of Pain</i>	1943, October 26 (Macmillan)	1940, October 18 (Centenary Press)
<i>Christian Behaviour</i>	1944, January 18 (Macmillan)	1943, April 19 (Geoffrey Bles/Centenary Press)
Christian Exposition		
<i>Beyond Personality: The Christian Idea of God</i>	1945, March 20 (Macmillan)	1944, October 9 (Geoffrey Bles/Centenary Press)
<i>The Abolition of Man</i>	1947, April 8 (Macmillan)	1943, January 6 (Oxford University Press)
<i>Miracles: A Preliminary Study</i>	1947, September 16 (Macmillan)	1947, May 12 (Geoffrey Bles/Centenary Press)

Source: Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

mainline Protestants and fundamentalist or evangelical Protestants. The chapter devoted to each group shows how the critical reception of C. S. Lewis sheds light on the history of that particular constituency in the years surrounding World War II. In other words, by bringing together what Lewis wrote and what Americans wrote about Lewis, we gain deeper insight into both Lewis and America.

Between 1935 and 1947, Americans enjoyed access to seventeen of Lewis's books. The Catholic firm Sheed & Ward published the first American edition of *The Pilgrim's Regress* in 1935. Soon four books from Lewis's literary scholarship became accessible through the New York office of Oxford University Press. Beginning in 1943, Macmillan was responsible for twelve titles, including two fantasies (*The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*); the Ransom Trilogy (a.k.a. Space Trilogy); three slim volumes of radio presentations lectures that later became *Mere Christianity*; three works of Christian or moral argument (*The Problem of Pain*, *The Abolition of Man*, and *Miracles*); and Lewis's edited collection of writings from George MacDonald.

At the end of chapter three, *C. S. Lewis in America* draws to a close by considering matters of contemporary relevance. Documenting the reception of Lewis's writing during this early period underscores the enduring qualities that have kept these works alive for so many readers in so many places. Attending to this reception history may in turn suggest how the approaches Lewis modeled decades ago might assist believers in addressing the public today.

This book, with a modest expansion and further editing, presents the lectures and responses that were first given at Wheaton College in early 2022 as the seventh series of the Ken and Jean Hansen Lectures at Wheaton's Marion E. Wade Center. In preparing the lectures for publication, I have retained some features of the original oral

presentations while revising the chapters with a general readership in view.

At a time of increasing pressure on the humanities in colleges and universities, and indeed of resistance everywhere to careful intellectual labor, philanthropy as exemplified by Walter and Darlene Hansen in endowing a lectureship in honor of Walter's parents becomes all the more meaningful. It is thus an honor to thank both generations of Hansens for their long-standing commitment to the authors curated at the Wade Center, for making this lecture series possible, and for their overarching desire to show that Christian learning can be pursued as a God-given task.

I am also deeply grateful to Marjorie Mead of the Wade Center for organizing the lectures as well as to Crystal Downing, David Downing, Laura Schmidt, and other Wade staff for all that was involved in bringing off a lecture series in pandemic times. Chloe DuBois and Elise Peterson deserve special mention for their diligence in pursuit of the book's images. Jerry Root and Lyle Dorsett do not realize how greatly I benefited from the many hours of illuminating conversation in which they indulged me on matters relating to C. S. Lewis. A special word of thanks is due to Karen Johnson, Kirk Farney, and Amy Black for the care with which they prepared their responses to the lectures and the depth of insight those responses add to this book. For the images reproduced in the book, I would like to thank the owners of rights to those images. I am particularly grateful to *America* magazine for permission to reprint as an appendix to this volume the two pathbreaking articles on Lewis, authored by Charles Brady, that appeared in the May 27, 1944, and June 10, 1944, issues of that periodical.

C. S. Lewis in America is dedicated to my wife, Maggie Noll, and to a former director of the Wade Center, the late Chris Mitchell, and for very good reasons. Maggie undertook the research that led to a nearly complete collection of early American reviews of Lewis's works and

then carefully organized that research while I was teaching at the University of Notre Dame. The project itself, however, came about only because Chris had asked me to prepare a talk as part of an observance in 2013 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of C. S. Lewis's death. It was a poignant but also joyful occasion in late 2021 to take part at the Wade Center in launching a book of essays in grateful memory of Chris, a book in which a preliminary essay based on Maggie's research was published.⁵

⁵Mark A. Noll, "C. S. Lewis in America, 1933–1943," in *The Undiscovered Lewis: Essays in Memory of Christopher W. Mitchell*, ed. Bruce D. Johnson (Hamden, CT: Winged Lion, 2021), 55-74. The book before you offers a different and much fuller consideration of the subject.

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