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## Review of The Inklings of Oxford: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Their Friends

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## *Book Review*

GRAYSON CARTER

**Harry Lee Poe [text] and James Ray Veneman [photography], *The Inklings of Oxford: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Their Friends*** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). 176 pages. \$24.99. ISBN: 9780310285038.

C. S. Lewis scholars and enthusiasts have previously benefited from the publication of two works illustrating the events of his life and surroundings—Douglas Gilbert and Clyde Kilby’s much admired pictorial guide, *C. S. Lewis: Images of His World* (1973; revised ed., 2005) and Walter Hooper’s illustrated biography, *Through Joy and Beyond* (1982). Such works provide a useful and valuable scholarly function, especially to those who have come to know and admire Lewis from a distance, but who have not been able to visit the numerous sites scattered across Northern Ireland and England closely associated with his life and work. Moreover, the academic world of Oxford, where Lewis spent the vast majority of his adult life, can often seem to outsiders as a closed and exclusive domain, despite the fact that many of the colleges have in recent years become more welcoming to paying visitors and to those attending expensive summer courses and conferences. Collections of visual images thus help to break down barriers of distance and exclusivity and expose their subjects in new and important ways, leading their readers to a deeper level of comprehension and a heightened sense of appreciation.

The lavishly illustrated *The Inklings of Oxford* is a stunning and welcomed contribution to this important visual tradition. Although (as the title suggests) it aims beyond a narrow study of a single individual Lewis plays the leading role throughout the narrative, and justifiably so given his position as the organizer and leading light of the Inklings—the celebrated literary circle that met (in various

locations and involving an ever-fluid combination of friends and colleagues) in Oxford from the early 1930s until shortly before Lewis' death in 1963.

The volume is composed of two integrated sections, plus an appendix. The American scholar Harry Poe has contributed a narrative description of a place (Oxford) and a body of friends (the Inklings) that coalesced to establish a common literary life centered on the mutual enjoyment of prose and poetry of a style then regarded by many as hopelessly anachronistic. Though largely devoid of originality, and prone at times to nostalgia and even sentimentality, Poe's narrative provides a valuable snapshot of both place and friends as viewed through the lens of an insider, or as one who has lived and studied at Oxford and who passionately appreciates both its contributions to scholarship and its quirky traditions and conventions. Fortunately, this initial section transcends the limitations of personal interpretation, perhaps most valuably in Poe's assessment of the various ways in which Lewis and his friends were influenced by Oxford (both the city and university), and how they, in turn, left an indelible imprint upon its contemporary life and its enduring influence.

The second section of this volume—more significant and enjoyable still, and brimming with visual fireworks—is composed of over 200 color images of Lewis, his friends, and many of their favorite places in and around Oxford. Produced principally by the American photographer James Ray Veneman (other photographs have been drawn from the archives at the Wade Center or were taken by Poe's daughter or by his colleague Ben Dockery), the images provide readers not only with a remarkable portrayal of Oxford's great set-piece locations, but also with welcomed glimpses into its everyday life.

The appendix contains three illustrated walking tours (with commentary and hand-drawn maps) of sites closely related to the life and work of Lewis and his friends. These tours provide helpful suggestions to navigate through the center of Oxford, its eastern suburb of Headington (where Lewis lived, worshipped and is buried), and through Port Meadow (from St Giles to the Trout pub along the Thames, a favorite destination of Lewis and his friends for lunch or drinks).

Scholars and admirers of Lewis (and the Inklings) will take great pleasure in this visually delightful and informative contribution. No doubt, it will grace coffee tables throughout North America and beyond and provide a most welcome gift to sympathetic friends and colleagues.