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## Review of Becoming C. S. Lewis: A Biography of Young Jack Lewis

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MacDonald. However, the “about the cover” information reverses this order. There are occasional typos: page 42 states that MacDonald’s ministry at Arundel at 28 months, while page 43 lists it at 29. More differentiation between Science and Scientism would have strengthened one essay, and another does not take note of the use of gas lighting and its influence on Victorian spiritual and dimensional experiences, but these are all small quibbles, and most should be corrected by future printings.

What this collection will provide is much to think about and to discuss, and a wealth of new information and inspiration. George MacDonald continues to inspire new generations of readers and thinkers. This volume is a worthy contribution to the continuation of MacDonald studies.

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Harry Lee Poe, *Becoming C. S. Lewis: A Biography of Youth Jack Lewis (1898-1918)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019). 276 pages + notes and index. \$22.99. ISBN 9781433562730.

There is a common refrain in the Lewis scholarship community that, “The world does not need another biography of C. S. Lewis.” While there are dozens of biographies on the market, Harry Lee Poe’s projected trilogy promises to dive into many neglected aspects of Lewis’s development. The first book in this series, *Becoming C. S. Lewis: A Biography of Young Jack Lewis (1898-1918)*, explores in magnificent detail the early familial and educational experiences of a young C. S. Lewis navigating the bitter landscape of losing his mother, schoolboy bullying, early infatuations, a flourishing friendship with Arthur Greeves, personal tutoring under “The Great Knock,” entrance exams, and the muddy trenches of a Great War. Even in this first installment, Poe makes it clear that Lewis endured many formative events in his young life, all substantial contributions to the scholar and apologist that Lewis grew to become. Poe’s volume not only delivers an entertaining and engaging look at Lewis’s life, it delves into new material that is not discussed in previous biographies and offers a unique glimpse into aspects of Lewis’s life.

Like his ancestor, Poe has a knack for dark humor. The first sentence in Chapter 3 proclaims, “Until he entered Arthur Greeves’s bedroom during the Easter Break of 1914, Jack Lewis had all of the makings of an ax murderer” (93). Those who are accustomed to the dry approach to typical biographies may be taken aback by such a proclamation. Yet, as Poe unspools the history of a young boy shaped by trauma, we begin to understand the difficulties of Lewis’s youth, difficulties that other biographers have often ignored or minimized. Lewis’s introverted tendencies, his grief from his mother’s passing, his uncomfortable relationship with Ms. Cowie, his preference for solitude—all of these characteristics would have branded Lewis a “troubled child” by today’s standards. The years before his war experiences and, ultimately, his spiritual conversion, do not reveal a future radio personality, Oxford lecturer, or reigning twentieth-century apologist. As *Spirits on Bondage* exhibits, young Jack Lewis was an adolescent fraught with doubts and idiosyncrasies. There was much darkness and uncertainty.

This aspect is one of the strengths of Poe’s approach. Poe reveals Jack Lewis as a regular boy. He could be difficult, whiny, and stubborn. Additionally, Lewis was shy around girls, was honest with friend Arthur Greeves about his affinity for erotic punishment, and was entranced by the opportunity for a university life. He had a struggling relationship with his father, like many teenage boys. Then, Poe extrapolates on the importance of Arthur’s friendship, Oxford, and later World War I in shaping Lewis’s social development. These experiences coaxed Lewis out of his painful introversion, and into a deeper comprehension of the world around him. Poe does his subject a great service by “humanizing” him. This is critical to a more nuanced understanding of the transformational arc C. S. Lewis experienced as a young adult.

Poe has conducted assiduous research on his topic, as the chapter entitled “A Conflicted Soul” illustrates. He borrows generously from the (unpublished) Lewis Papers. Poe read many primary resources to mold his text. The difference is not simply reflected in the overall tone. Poe has a talent to capture a more intimate view of Lewis, all the while engaging the reader in the narrative. Although there are many biographies on the market, Poe has managed the strange feat of making the same information new and fresh. Especially important are his discussions of music and literature in shaping young Lewis. Most biographies mention

the same threads of influence—the musical transcendence of Wagner, the varied worlds of William Morris, Longfellow’s captivating translation of *Tegner’s Drapa*, the ethereal art of Arthur Rackham—but never explore deeper than a cursory glance. Poe, in contrast, writes at length about Jack’s fondness for the gramophone and his enjoyment of concerts, explaining the myths and legends in startling detail. These are all important facets of his development, as all introduced him to the enraptured feeling of “Northerness” that would enchant Jack for his whole life. The trend for many biographies is to exclusively focus on philosophical and educational aspects of Jack’s upbringing and discard the rest as trivial or prosaic. In Poe’s text, all of the elements combine to form a comprehensive portrait of Jack as a brilliant, but yet persnickety young man.

One of the aspects most admired about this biography is Poe’s careful treatment of C. S. Lewis’s family, particularly his examination of Albert and Flora Lewis. Most biographers indict Albert as a lukewarm father, one who cared more about his professional duties than raising his sons. Yet, Poe extrapolates the psychology behind this lingering resentment toward Albert, instead of branding him as a paternal failure. Of one letter in which Jack identifies himself and his father as “Shakespearian students,” Poe explains: “Many biographies of Lewis have emphasized the distance between C. S. Lewis and his father, but the literary connection between them formed early. Perhaps the love of books, and in this case Shakespeare, provided a bond between father and son, or perhaps it provided a way for young Lewis to gain or seek approval” (61). Historically, Albert was typically portrayed as a workaholic tyrannical patriarch who attempted to control aspects of his boys’ lives, who was overly judgmental, who was too frugal to send his sons to a proper school in England, and who—after the death of his wife—sent his boys off to fend for themselves in English schools in which students and instructors mocked them for being “Irish.” However, it is important to note that Albert lost his father and his brother along with his wife in the span of a few months during 1908. His grief, much like Jack’s when he wrote *A Grief Observed*, was long and pervasive. Despite this, Albert tried to steer his boys to a university education amidst the trauma and continue to create a happy home for his sons: “Regardless of the habits of Albert Lewis that would annoy his young son, home remained the place of security where Jacks found his greatest encouragement and acceptance throughout his youth” (Poe 39). Later, during his tenure at Campbell College, Lewis was slowly warming to his father’s presence. Poe writes,

“Living at home, he experienced the closest relations with his father that he had during boyhood. Without the presence and influence of Warnie to get into mischief, he had none of his usual conflict and adversarial relations with his father. Recalling this time with his father at home, Lewis observed, ‘I remember no other time in my life of such untroubled affections; we were famously snug together’” (54).

It is significant to note that the choice of preparatory schools was a collaboration of both parents. Poe illuminates the fact that Albert and Flora decided on Wynyard School corporately and also consulted an educational firm as to the best institution to educate their sons. Flora was surprisingly involved with her children’s academic development, a bit unconventional for women of the time, and yet nothing about their brilliant parents seemed conventional. As Poe illuminates, Albert rose to fame as a statesman and a police court solicitor although he was born the last son of a boilermaker. Flora garnered several honors in mathematics and logic at Queen’s University. She was one of the first women to earn such an accomplishment. The combined power and influence of these two individuals is crucial in understanding the complete impact on Lewis’s young life. Most recognize the death of Flora as a turning point, which is a significant factor. And yet, biographers only seem to discuss her in terms of the substantial impact from her *absence*. Flora, as Poe points out, exercised a hands-on approach to educating her sons in languages and mathematics. Poe underscores the accumulated importance of “a house brimming with books” due to Albert’s love of literature and Flora’s consistent iteration of imagination and logic during holidays with her boys. This redeeming portrait of the two parents casts a whole new light on Lewis’s development.

Poe’s first installment of C. S. Lewis biographies achieves the difficult task of being both fresh and familiar. Poe’s meticulous research is fully displayed here, with information that is enticing, but never overwrought. It is a welcome addition to former Lewis biographies, serving as a corrective to the flaws of these previous texts. Other writers have approached Lewis’s youth with a wide, sweeping perspective, yet Poe—in his three-volume work—has promised a more comprehensive and satisfying experience of exploring Lewis’s life on an intimate level.

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