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Review of C. S. Lewis: A Very Short Introduction

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James Como, *C. S. Lewis: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). 160 pages. \$11.95. ISBN 9780198828242.

James Como may have turned in the first draft of *C. S. Lewis: A Very Short Introduction* to Oxford University Press (OUP) within a few months of receiving the contract to write it, but he had been working on the book for over fifty years. Como considered the possibility of a Very Short Introduction (VSI) book on Lewis for many years when he finally suggested that Oxford University Press (OUP) feature such a summative work on C. S. Lewis. After more than a year of silence, OUP responded with an invitation for Como himself to embrace the task.

The book serves as a commentary on Austin Farrer's description of his friend Lewis: ". . . he really was a Christian—by which I mean, he never thought he had the right to stop" (5). Reading the book, one is delighted by Lewis's prodigious output. He not only contributed to the fields of English criticism, theory, and history, fantasy and children's literature, apologetics and theology, but his work had transformative influence in each subject. And he did all this while also answering thousands of letters, taking walking tours of the country, meeting regularly with the Inklings, caring for the often very needy people in his household, traveling to give lectures, presiding over the Oxford Socratic Club, and holding down a job as a university don. Como's tongue-in-cheek representation of this is that there must have been multiple C. S. Lewises. Either that or he never slept.

Aside from its impressive thoroughness, given the space constraints, the strength of the book is in its anecdotes through which readers will feel like they really have been introduced to C. S. Lewis. Hardly a page passes without Como's regaling his readers with a Lewis story. He tells of Lewis's delighted rediscovery and donning of his dew-soaked hat while on a walking tour with his friend (4). He shares Bob Jones Jr.'s impression after meeting Lewis—"that man smokes a pipe, and that man drinks liquor—but I do believe he is a Christian!" (11). Then there's the saga of Lewis's relationship with T. S. Eliot—how it developed from their first cold meeting, brokered by their mutual friend Charles Williams, in which Eliot told Lewis he looked older in person, to partnering together to revise the *Book of Common Prayer*, to going on double dates, and to Eliot pushing for Faber and Faber to publish *A Grief Observed*, which he immediately

recognized as Lewis's despite the original pseudonymity (94). Some readers will also be surprised to learn that there is real evidence for Lewis's tryst with Mrs. Moore (22-4), that Lewis experienced a "dark night of the soul" in which he thought he may never write another word (69), and that Lewis considered remarrying after his wife Joy passed away (103).

While the anecdotes are the highlight of the book, the summaries of Lewis's major works are the lowlight. To be fair, it is very difficult to give a short summary of Lewis's writing. He is concise, he is very particular about the meaning of the words he employs, and his fantasies are deep and complex—all qualities that do not favor easy summation. But on top of this excusable difficulty, many of the summaries of Lewis's fiction contain errors. Most are of little consequence, like saying Belbury was destroyed by an earthquake when it was really Edgestow (60), or that Shift wore the Lion's skin rather than Puzzle (80). No reader will feel betrayed when they read the real thing. Other errors are more problematic, like Como's identifying Shasta's supposal that he has been chased by three lions—he actually thinks it was two—as an allusion to the Trinity in *Horse and His Boy* (79). The real allusion comes in Aslan's threefold repetition of "Myself" in answer to Shasta's question "Who are you?"

Unfortunately, the errors are not confined to the summaries. At one point the book indicates there were thirteen founders of the Lewis Society when it was fourteen (xviii). Worse still, Como repeats a claim made elsewhere that George H. W. Bush borrowed his "Thousand Points of Light" phrase from *The Magician's Nephew* (2). In reality, Bush's speechwriter, Peggy Noonan, has disavowed having read *The Chronicles of Narnia* prior to employing the phrase. The former error suggests potentially sloppy editing, while the latter seems indicative of an overly indiscriminate attitude toward materials favorable to Lewis. Both errors are far too common in the area of Lewis and Inklings publishing.

The OUP strictures on VSI books make it difficult to follow up on Como's sources, since there are no footnotes or in-text citations. The book does have an extensive, nearly exhaustive bibliography, which is a valuable resource for someone interested in pursuing Lewis studies but not for checking individual claims.

Despite these obstacles, the book is overall well conceived, well crafted, and well written. It is a valuable resource for scholars and layman alike and

deserves a reprint or second edition with corrections as soon as possible.

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Stephanie L. Derrick, *The Fame of C. S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). 240 pages. \$30.00. ISBN 9780198819448.

The fiftieth anniversary of C. S. Lewis's passing brought with it a sudden turn to popular assessments of his impact, as well as more academic approaches from biographer Alister McGrath and American historians George Marsden, Mark Noll, and Alan Snyder. Beyond these general approaches, two critical studies have emerged that are designed to challenge our perception of Lewis's place in the public sphere. Samuel Joeckel's *The C. S. Lewis Phenomenon* (2013) looks metacritically at the field of Lewis studies and considers Lewis as a public intellectual. Stephanie Derrick's *The Fame of C. S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* (2018) explores his role as a contrarian and intersects it with the mass cultural phenomena of broadcasting, publishing, education, religious change, technological development, and globalization.

The Fame of C. S. Lewis uses the tools of reception history, textual scholarship, and biography to argue that Lewis's enormous public profile and extensive influence cannot be contributed solely to Lewis's abilities. Rooting her study in the way that Lewis shaped his image as a gadfly and controversialist, Derrick argues convincingly that his success is bound up with technological shifts, market plans, particular personalities, changes in academic, educational, and intellectual culture, and evolving publishing models. As Derrick argues for the "myriad of circumstances, people, and events" that "directed the path of Lewis's reception," it is impossible to replay the way that Lewis's "reception from first to last was shaped by a thousand individual choices, events, and circumstances" (200-1). Certain threads of interest to Lewis readers are worth drawing out.

Derrick observes that Lewis shaped his own persona in Oxford and Cambridge, combining the contrarian and critical nature of his thought