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Review of The Oxford Inklings: Lewis, Tolkien and Their Circle

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modern science fiction film and television is refreshing, shedding light on AOM from a new vantage point, making ideas from the 1940s resonate with our own time.

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Colin Duriez, *The Oxford Inklings: Lewis, Tolkien and Their Circle* (Oxford: Lion Hudson Books, 2015). 296 pages, including full-color photograph inserts, "An Inklings Gallery," and "A Select Inklings Chronology." \$16.95. ISBN 9780745956343.

Every biographer of the Inklings faces at least three daunting tasks: first, to strike a suitable balance between breadth and depth; second, to tell the story of the Inklings without giving short shrift to the subtle and sometimes complex ideas that animated their work; and third, to offer insights and perspectives that are not mere summaries of familiar facts that have been recounted many times before. In *The Oxford Inklings*, Colin Duriez achieves all three of these goals, and does so admirably. The fact that it takes him fewer than 300 pages to pull it off makes this a genuinely remarkable book.

Inevitably, an Inklings biography will focus primarily on a handful of core members of the group. Duriez himself identifies nineteen individuals whose involvement is sufficient to merit a paragraph or two in his "Inklings Gallery," and it would be counterproductive for him to attempt to discuss each of their lives and contributions exhaustively. As one would expect, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams receive the most attention. One great strength of *The Oxford Inklings*, however, is its effective use of other Inklings' writings to give the reader a sense for what the group was like and how its most prominent members were understood by less well-known or more infrequent attendees. Duriez quotes from the letters and diaries of Nevill Coghill, Lord David Cecil, James Dundas-Grant, Roger Lancelyn Green, Robert "Humphrey" Havard, Warren Lewis, and John Wain, all of whom attended Inklings meetings and offered valuable perspectives. Many of these primary source documents are not easily obtainable, even for academics with a serious interest in the Inklings. Duriez has done his homework, and done it well. His readers are the beneficiaries.

The strongest sections of the book are the topics covered in Chapters Six through Eight. (There are eleven chapters in all, plus a preface, an introduction, and two very good appendices.) Perhaps not coincidentally, these chapters deal most explicitly with the 1930s and 1940s, what Duriez himself calls “the Golden Age of the Inklings” (154). These chapters alone are worth the price of the book. Duriez understands the mindset of the Inklings as well as he understands the events of their lives, and in this section he unpacks the philosophical and literary ideas that informed so much of their published work. Particularly helpful here is his discussion of Romantic literature, which enables Duriez to make explicit connections between the writings of Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams, and his overview of Lewis’s *Rehabilitations*, which brings Barfield into the mix as well. Readers looking for insight into the Inklings’ minds as well as their lives will not be disappointed.

Also to Duriez’s credit is the fact that *The Oxford Inklings* contains material with which even serious Inklings aficionados may be unfamiliar. This includes the excerpts from letters and diaries mentioned above, an extensive discussion of Lewis’s narrative poem *Dymer*, details about the Inklings’ walking tours, and the involvement of multiple Inklings with the Oxford Socratic Club. Duriez offers a thought-provoking contribution to recent debates on several controversial topics: the date of Lewis’s conversion to Christianity (relegated, unfortunately, to an endnote; see note 9 on pages 265-66), notes—*contra* much conventional wisdom—that Inklings meetings did not cease in 1949, a more robust portrayal of Hugo Dyson than other Inklings biographies, and a successfully rebut to the claim that Tolkien unequivocally disdained *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

This is not to say that *The Oxford Inklings* is a perfect book. Duriez is a bit too willing to abandon chronology when exploring a theme, with the result that it can be difficult to maintain one’s bearings with respect to the overall narrative. Likewise, there are passages (especially in the opening chapters) that feel too much like mere collections of historical data, and others where allusions to important ideas are made without being explained. One prominent example of this is found on page 134: “C. S. Lewis thoroughly agreed with [Tolkien’s] insights, as can be seen in his own literary scholarship and fiction, though Tolkien didn’t always see it there!” Readers who are well-acquainted with the Inklings can speculate

as to what, precisely, Duriez has in mind here, but speculation is all that is available. In short: readers who do not already know much about the *Inklings* may find this passage and others like it somewhat confusing.

All in all, however, *The Oxford Inklings* is a great success. It can be recommended to anyone with an interest in the *Inklings*, and strongly recommended to those who already have some familiarity with them and are seeking a fresh perspective. This book is a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion of Lewis, Tolkien, and their circle.

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Justin Buckley Dyer and Micah J. Watson, *C. S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law* (New York, NY: Cambridge, 2016). ix+160 pages. \$26.99. ISBN 9781107518971.

There's a long-standing rumor that C. S. Lewis was curiously silent about contemporary politics during his lifetime. His father Albert, a police court solicitor in Belfast for 40 years, often discussed local politics at the family home Little Lea, to the chagrin of his two young sons. Although the boys would create an imaginary world titled Boxen with anthropomorphic characters and the inimitable toad, Lord Big, this was perhaps the only positive consequence of Albert's endless prattling about Belfast politics. Youngest son Clive hated such racquet, and eschewed the topic, at least publicly, for most of his life. However, Justin Buckley Dyer and Micah J. Watson reexamine such a claim in their new work: "Although many of Lewis's best-known works contain withering critiques of modern political thought, Lewis never wrote a treatise on politics or offered a sustained vision of a well-functioning political order. "Even so," they continue, "Lewis did think deeply about politics, and he was well aware of the great conversation about human nature and political order that philosophers had been engaged in across the centuries" (88). More precisely, Dyer and Watson explore the philosophical and theoretical origins of Lewis's view on public morality. Shaped significantly through correspondence and fictional/instructional texts, this work places Lewis's perception of politics firmly in context.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is its thorough, erudite