

Introduction

Mere Education

C.S. Lewis is perhaps best known for his children's fiction, the seven novels which make up the *Chronicles of Narnia: The Magician's Nephew* (1955); *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (1950); *The Horse and His Boy* (1954); *Prince Caspian* (1951); *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'* (1952); *The Silver Chair* (1953); and *The Last Battle* (1956), some of which are now major movies. Lewis is also well-known as the twentieth century's greatest Christian apologist and the author of *Mere Christianity* (1942-44) and *The Screwtape Letters* (1942). He was good friends with J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1937-49) (through whom he became a Christian). He also knew Dorothy L. Sayers, who wrote *The Lost Tools of Learning* (1947). Yet even fifty years after his death (Lewis died on the same day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963), the remarkable, some would say prophetic, insights he offered concerning the education and schooling of young people are not so well-known.

Lewis, or 'Jack' as he was known to his friends, was an inspirational, if unconventional (some would say eccentric) teacher himself. His contribution to the field of education and schooling (as well as to teaching and learning more broadly conceived) goes far beyond his experience of teaching undergraduates at a university. In some of its darkest days, during the Second World War, he taught the people of a whole country through his radio broadcasts and criss-crossed Great Britain giving talks to service personnel on military bases and answering their questions about the meaning of life. He took a keen interest in secondary schooling, in part to be able to teach students who had just completed this phase of their education, before he taught them as undergraduates. As an educator, Lewis was interested in what schooling is for, what its aims are, how it influences young people and how they learn to reason and to

think. He was keenly aware of the values that are transmitted by textbooks and teachers and how they might influence the beliefs and commitments of young people many years after they have left school.

The 'problem' with Lewis, over fifty years on, is that most modern readers, including parents, teachers and school leaders, may not find much of his thought on education readily accessible. Lewis was a prolific author and his thought on education is sprinkled liberally throughout many books (see the bibliography) in different genres. For instance, much of his remarkable and profound insight concerning the psychology of leadership and the management of educational institutions is contained in the science fiction trilogy he wrote for an adult audience comprising *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra (Voyage to Venus)* (1943) and *That Hideous Strength* (1945). His critique of assessment practices and the ways in which teachers mark students' work can be found in his letters (*Letters to Children*, 1958); Lewis replied to every child who wrote to him and many sent their schoolwork to him for comment with their letters. His insights about the curriculum, setting by ability, differentiation in teaching, vocational education, academic excellence, moral education, private and state schooling, choice and government control, can be found in his essays on ethics and politics published in collections such as *Compelling Reason* (1996). His own major work in the field of education is entitled *The Abolition of Man* (1943) and concerns teaching and learning in secondary or high schools although it has a much wider application than to just this age range. Yet this seminal work on education is not necessarily very accessible to many modern readers, even if they work in education. The aim of the present book is to draw out and synthesise the educational applications in a wide range of work by Lewis, both fiction and non-fiction, and to present this in an accessible form. The objective is to present Lewis's educational vision for the benefit of a wide audience of school leaders, teachers, parents and students.

Lewis provides fresh insights for twenty-first century readers on education and schooling and uses memorable images to illustrate his points, which are often surprising and sometimes shocking. For thirty years he was a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford University, and he became Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Magdalene College, Cambridge University. Lewis wrote important literary criticism such as *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), a volume of *The Oxford History of English Literature* (1944) and *Studies in Words* (1960) and much of this work focuses on the use of

allegory. As will become apparent in the following pages, he was a master of allegory and symbolism when analyzing education and schooling. Lewis was a world expert on Middle English (the English used before Caxton's printing press was introduced in the late 1470s and after Old English, otherwise known as Anglo-Saxon, which was written and spoken until the twelfth century in what is now England). The word 'mere' is used in the title of this book in its Middle English sense as an adjective meaning 'pure, unalloyed or unadulterated'. Interestingly, within the eight acres where Lewis lived at The Kilns outside Oxford, there is still a large pond or a small 'mere' to this day although, sadly, it is now becoming silted up. Every attempt has been made in this book to avoid any 'muddiness' but we should be aware that we are often seeing education and schooling through a 'silted-up' twenty-first-century perspective (to begin with at least). The following pages will challenge many widely accepted and popular ideas about education and schooling, which are often taken for granted. Like Lewis, this book will not be popular in certain quarters as it seeks the reclamation of education and schooling.

Lewis had a life-long love of the sea and the boundaries between land and sea are still significant in the regions where Anglo-Saxon, Old English, was once spoken. A 'mere' in England is an area of water such as a lake and *Windermere* in the English Lake District is one of the largest and most well-known examples. A 'meer' in twenty-first century Germany refers to a 'sea' and in The Netherlands indicates a 'lake'. I have an old *National Geographic* magazine from 1933, which shows how the dams of the *Ijsselmeer* and the draining of the *Wieringermeer* had added extensive areas of land to the The Netherlands. One photograph is of a farmer's field, now miles inland, where the hull of a fishing boat rests in the middle of a field of grain; what was once the sea ('meer') floor is now farmland where crops are grown. This Anglo-Saxon word can be traced to the ancient language that linguists call Proto-Indo-European, the root of all languages spoken some six thousand years ago in the area of the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates where 'mey-' denoted 'to fence'. Today, dairy producing districts and the bulb fields in The Netherlands are located on land reclaimed from the sea. Yet the *National Geographic* writer notes, 'our Department of Public works would gladly make a present of a fine strip of Dutch shoreland to any of our inhabitants willing to take the responsibility of keeping land and sea in their respective places' and recounts the efforts 'both medieval and modern' to manage the boundaries.¹ *Mere Education* seeks to help parents, teachers and

leaders to set boundaries so they can protect schools and schooling from the incoming tide of ideological assumptions that threaten to erode and undermine the wholeness and purity of education. I was recently driving through The Netherlands with a Dutch friend who pointed out that the road we were on was below sea level. In The Netherlands, if a dam fails then the land is over-run by the sea. *Mere Education* is designed to provide a bulwark against the encroaching tide: it is written to inspire excellence in teaching, leadership, the curriculum and assessment by helping readers attend to the foundations of education and schooling.

There is another sense in which the title of this book is singularly appropriate. The sandy seabed of the 'meer', once exposed to the air and no longer covered by water, is initially unproductive and resembles a desert. The only way such a desert can flourish is by extensive irrigation. In *The Magician's Nephew*, the first in the sequence of the seven novels that make up the *Chronicles of Narnia*, Digory and Polly are dragged back through time into a world that is devoid of life and barren. Such a world is not a safe place for children or young people (or any of us) to inhabit. This book focuses on the nature of the desert, why deserts should be irrigated, how they should be irrigated and the results of such irrigation. According to Lewis the task of the modern educator is 'to irrigate deserts' by which he meant that it is as teachers 'inculcate just sentiments'² that they enable the *moral sense* of their students to thrive and cultivate *good character*. The task of this book is to show how we might go about it so that 'the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose'³