

## CHAPTER SIX

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# THE OXFORD FANTASISTS

CLIVE STAPLES LEWIS,  
JOHN RONALD REUEL TOLKIEN, AND  
FREDERICK MAURICE POWICKE

### I

#### SAVE THE BELOVED LAND

In the early forties, during the height of the war years, while a bomber moon shone down upon the deer park on the grounds of Magdalen College, Oxford, a half dozen dons and their friends, who were also writers and lived in or near Oxford, gathered on Tuesday evenings in the rooms of the Magdalen College tutor in medieval literature and political theory. The Magdalen tutor was C. S. Lewis—Jack to his friends. They drank beer and tea, smoked heavily in the British manner, throwing their cigarette ashes on the worn carpet, and read to each other from, and caustically commented on, written work in progress. The group came to call themselves the Inklings. One of this group in Jack Lewis's rooms was an editor of the Oxford University Press, the dramatist and novelist and Christian polemicist Charles Williams, who was relocated by the press in Oxford from London for the duration of the war. He died there in 1945. Another of the Inklings was a lawyer, Owen Barfield, later Jack Lewis's executor, which was eventually to be not a small job.

Another Inking was the reclusive professor of Anglo-Saxon, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, called Ronald. In the late twenties and early thirties he was renowned as an authority on Old and Middle English. He was the leading scholar on the subject of two precious fourteenth-century poems written anonymously in the Midlands, about seventy miles from Oxford, in the dialect of that region. These poems, *Sir*

*Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*, are now regarded, along with *Beowulf* (c. 800) and the works of Chaucer (late fourteenth century), as the greatest medieval poetry in the English language. There is no more beautiful poem in any medieval language than *Pearl*, an allegorical elegy for a dead child. Tolkien was responsible for the definitive text of *Sir Gawain*, published in 1925. For thirty years, off and on, he labored on a translation of *Pearl*; it was finally published posthumously, but it was soon superseded by a remarkable metrical translation made by Yale's Marie Borroff.

Despite his prodigious learning and early professional accomplishments, Tolkien's academic career in the early forties seemed on a downward trajectory. In the previous decade his only book publication was a children's fantasy, *The Hobbit* (1937), which had sold well. Tolkien's publisher clamored for a sequel, but as yet he had not produced it, although he desperately needed the money, having a wife and three children in a lower-middle-class suburb of Oxford. Tolkien had no private means, and he had to waste a month every summer picking up a few extra pounds grading examination booklets. Tolkien read to the Inklings miscellaneous sections of what seemed to be a disordered mythological fantasy addressed more to adults than children. Who would want to read this thing? Who would dare publish it? Jack Lewis's response to it was only intermittently enthusiastic.

Lewis in the war years was by far the best known of the Inklings group, both within the academic world and even more among the general public. He had established his reputation as a leading medieval literary historian with *The Allegory of Love* (1936), a pioneering and influential study of medieval romantic literature, which he had written one chapter at a time over a half dozen long summer vacations from his heavy Magdalen College teaching load. He was now rapidly gaining attention among the general public for his children's fiction, for science fiction novels and allegories with a Christian twist, and for a series of BBC lectures that were essentially soft-core sermons.

By 1943 Lewis was the best-known Christian polemicist in Britain, and he had begun to acquire a cult following in the United States. He lived in a fashionable house just outside Oxford with his brother, an army reserve officer and a nonacademic but very capable historian of Bourbon France in the Age of Louis XIV. They were bachelors. The household was dominated by a dragon housekeeper, the mother of Jack Lewis's best friend, who was killed in the First World War. With this difficult woman, Lewis had a bizarre, probably celibate,

repressive, sadomasochistic relationship for three decades. Lewis was slowly becoming affluent from book royalties; he changed his lifestyle very little and gave away part of the money to relatives or to one charity or another.

Tolkien and Lewis were at least visibly good friends as well as colleague luminaries in Oxford's medieval language and literature faculty. Their friendship was always tense because their personalities were so different—Tolkien, reclusive, driven, querulous, unsatisfied; Lewis, calm, affable, outgoing, sociable. Underneath their surface friendship there was a deep rivalry between them, not so much in scholarship as in writing fantasy literature. Of all the medievalists of the twentieth century, Lewis and Tolkien have gained incomparably the greatest audience, although 99.9 percent of their readers have never looked at their scholarly work. They are among the best-selling authors of modern times for their works of fantasy, adult and children's. There are forty million copies of Lewis's work in print. The novel that Tolkien read bits of to the Inklings, with mixed response in the early forties, was finally published with trepidation by Allen and Unwin in three volumes in 1954 and 1955. It has now sold eight million copies in many languages, with about half the sales in an American paperback edition. This is *The Lord of the Rings*.

In the early forties, while Tolkien was grinding his way through his six-hundred-thousand-word fantasy, typing it all himself, with only marginal hope of ever finding a publisher, Lewis's fame grew steadily. In 1949 Jack Lewis's smiling face graced the cover of *Time* magazine, and he gained a huge audience in the United States. It tells you a lot about Lewis and Tolkien that although they shared a huge commercial success in the United States, greater than in their own country by a significant margin, neither ever set foot across the Atlantic. Today there is an institute devoted to Lewis's work at Wheaton College in Illinois, and the number of American doctoral dissertations written on Tolkien grows at a steady pace.

At the end of the war Lewis was the center of a popular transatlantic Christian cult, and his scholarly reputation also advanced steadily—eventually he published five scholarly books—but it is more likely that Tolkien, then regarded by many of his colleagues, possibly including Lewis, as a burnout case and a somewhat embarrassing failure who ought to resign his prestigious chair and give a younger and more productive man a chance at it, whose fame will be of infinite duration. It now looks as though *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the enduring classics of English literature and that a century from now,

while Lewis's reputation will have flattened out, Tolkien will stand in the company of Swift and Dickens as a creator of imaginative fiction and in the lineage of fantasy writers going back to the author of *Pearl*, which he himself rescued from very deep obscurity.

When Rayner Unwin, Tolkien's publisher, was preparing *The Lord of the Rings* for publication in 1954, he asked Lewis to contribute a blurb for the dust jacket. Lewis complied, comparing Tolkien's novel with the writings of the Renaissance Italian poet Ariosto. Tolkien found this praise a bit overdone, and in fact, Lewis had mixed feelings about Tolkien's accomplishment. He did not anticipate the phenomenal popular success of Tolkien's fantasy of mythic quest. He did not expect that out of the shabby converted garage attached to Tolkien's modest suburban house would come a work of such international celebrity.

In terms of shaping of the Middle Ages in the popular culture of the twentieth century, Tolkien and Lewis have had an incalculable effect, and the story is far from ended. Their fictional fantasies cannot be separated from their scholarly writing. Their work in each case should be seen as a whole and as communicating an image of the Middle Ages that has entered profoundly and indelibly into world culture.

Whatever the tensions in their personal relationships, Lewis and Tolkien were important and good for each other. They did not so much influence each other along specific, calculable lines as they encouraged each other to pursue hazardous journeys of creation. For more than twenty years they emboldened, criticized, and reinforced each other. They legitimated for each other their singular careers, in which, while conscientiously fulfilling their teaching responsibilities, they took time (in Tolkien's case almost all of it) from their scholarly work to transmute their medieval learning into mythopoetic fiction, fantasy literature for a mass audience that communicated the sensibility of medieval epic and romance.

They were resented and envied by their colleagues, Lewis thereby failing to get the chair he wanted at Oxford and forced to find one at Cambridge (while continuing to live three days a week in his Oxford house), Tolkien losing much of his credibility in his colleagues' eyes. Strengthening each other's resolve, they persevered and transcended the academic world and became international media figures.

Their fantasy writing was a very serious undertaking. It was not done as a hobby or primarily as a moneymaking venture, although they both died well-off from it. They wanted to impart a sense of

medieval myth to the widest audience possible. They wanted to represent to the public the impress of the kind of traditional ethic they derived from their devotion to conservative Christianity. But essentially they wrote as all creative writers do, from some compulsion within their beings, from something beyond the level of consciousness. Tolkien memorably described this obsession in 1953: "One writes such a story not out of the leaves of trees still to be observed, not by means of botany and soil-science; but it grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mold of the mind; out of all that has been thought or seen or read, that has long been forgotten, descending into the deeps."

Lewis and Tolkien had very similar personal tastes and life-styles. They disliked French cuisine and liked plain English food. They did not relish travel abroad or driving motorcars. They were generally hostile to modern technology, although Lewis occasionally took in a film and came to appreciate sound recording. Lewis spoke also for Tolkien when he wrote in 1940: "I am conscious of a partly pathological hostility to what is fashionable." Like nearly all Oxbridge dons of their generation, they had little use for psychoanalysis, and neither ever had psychotherapy. They disliked dressing up and nearly always appeared in worn tweeds and baggy trousers. A brisk walk in the country followed by tea was a high point of each one's day.

They had no interest whatever in the United States and in American culture. They knew lots of people lived across the Atlantic because after their best sellers had appeared, they received innumerable letters from there, usually from women groupies. They courteously and carefully responded to such letters, but they never bothered to learn about the culture and society whence they came. For them the United States was just a colonial land with a thick and affluent population.

Both men were deeply affected by a nostalgia and a love for a rapidly disappearing England graced by the middle-class, highly literate Christian culture into which they had been born. They saw a continuity of this culture stretching back into the Middle Ages, when, in their perception, it originated. For them, these vibrant, imaginative, complex Middle Ages were in many essentials still activated in the donnish world of mid-twentieth-century Oxbridge and the English countryside, if not so much in London. Lewis and Tolkien wanted not only to preserve but to revitalize through their writing and teaching this Anglo-Edwardian retromedieval culture. In the mechanistic, capitalistic, aggressive age of Harold Macmillan and Margaret Thatcher,

it looked as though their program of cultural nostalgia would have little long-range impact. In the 1990s we cannot be so sure of that.

The Lewis-Tolkien philosophy of history is lyrically summed up by Tolkien's quasi hero Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*: "I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must be often to be so, Sam, when things are in danger; some one has to give them up, lose them. So that others may keep them. But you are my heir: . . . and you will read things out of the Red Book and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more."

Lewis saw himself, Tolkien, and his other Oxbridge friends as spokesmen for an "Old European, or Old Western Culture," that was under siege. We know where Lewis and Tolkien would stand in the current dispute about the canon of literature. They were "dinosaurs," and it might be that "there are not going to be many more dinosaurs," said Lewis. But they were going to fight the last good fight. In Lewis's words, "The preservation of society, and the species itself, are ends that do not hang on the precarious thread of Reason: They are given by instinct. . . . We have an instinctive urge to preserve our own species. That is why men ought to work for posterity." This instinctive urge for preservation of humankind is not pursued through natural spontaneity but rather through highly literate discipline. Preservation is mediated through the literature and philosophy of the Middle Ages and the subsequent heritage deriving from and developing out of medieval humanistic culture. Their chief vehicle in this perilous journey of salvation was mythic fiction. As Lewis wrote of the sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser, they sought "to produce a tale more solemn, more redolent of the past, more venerable, than any real medieval romance . . . to hand on to succeeding generations a poetic symbol of the [Middle Ages] whose charms have proved inexhaustible."

Lewis (1898–1963) and Tolkien (1892–1973) differed in their personal lives in two significant respects. Tolkien fell in love when he was sixteen with a girl of his class five years his senior and married her five years later, just before he went to fight in France. He had three children and a stable, happy family life although his wife disliked Oxford for the forty years she lived there, feeling isolated and lonely. When Tolkien retired and had his first royalty checks from *The Lord of the Rings*, she made him move to a residential hotel in a plebeian seaside resort. One of Tolkien's sons also became an Oxford literature don.

Lewis was extremely repressed sexually. He did not marry until 1955 and did not consummate the marriage for several months thereafter. His wife was an ex-Communist New York Jewish groupie with two small sons who forced herself on him. She died of cancer in 1960. From the time he was a schoolboy, Lewis was affected by sadomasochistic fantasies of whipping, "something beautifully intimate and also very humiliating," he reported to a friend.

The other difference between Lewis and Tolkien was in their class background. Lewis came from a comfortably middle-class suburban professional family. His father was a successful lawyer. Tolkien's family was sliding into genteel poverty, greatly accelerated by the death of his father when he was four years old. He grew up in stringent economic circumstances and made it through prep school and college only on a series of scholarships. Lewis was therefore free and easy with money and generous to a fault. Tolkien was, not surprisingly, stingy and tight. He never hired a typist for the manuscript of *The Lord of the Rings*, and until it was set in type, there was only one copy. It was Tolkien's children who for the most part enjoyed the fiscal benefit of his best-selling smash in the last two decades of his long life.

But there were three ways in which the biographies of Lewis and Tolkien are very similar. First, they were outlanders, products of the Empire in its day of autumnal glow. Tolkien (whose family on his father's side came to Britain from Germany in the late seventeenth century) was born in South Africa and spent the first four years of his life there. Lewis was born into the Belfast Anglo-Irish and grew up in Northern Ireland. For them, therefore, England was a place to come home to and all the more to be cherished. At the same time they were at least in earlier years conscious of themselves as outlanders, as colonials.

Secondly, and most important, Lewis lost his mother when he was ten. Tolkien (who had already experienced his father's death) lost his mother when he was twelve. Lewis's father was very remote and unemotional, and Tolkien was a full-fledged orphan, with a local priest as his guardian. Each revered his mother's memory. Early loss of a parent, especially in the case of men, is a powerful stimulant for independence and creativity. It also stimulates a fantasy world of search for a happy time and land, a sublimated reunion with the absent mother.

Finally, Lewis and Tolkien were products of the era of British decline that occupied most of their lifetimes. They fought as officers

in the First World War. Both witnessed scenes of indescribable carnage. From this experience they derived an appreciation of physical courage, an imaginative taste for violence, and a sense of the instability and fragility of life. The "Dark Power" is an ever-recurring threat. All these qualities are reflected in their fantasy novels. Lewis and Tolkien belonged to Britain's posthegemonic generation. The Empire was not lost until after World War II, but in the late thirties and forties, between Munich in 1938 and the abandonment of the raj ten years later, in spite of the dogged Christian heroism of the war, it was pretty clear that Britain's day of wealth and power was over. It was the time of Britannia's "sunset and evening star."

The response to economic and imperial decline was in the Britain of the forties a literary ambience of despairing resignation, suspicion of and incapacity to sustain an advanced technological society, and an intense but short-lived Christian revival. The leading British writers of the period—T. S. Eliot in poetry and drama, F. R. Leavis in literary criticism and cultural commentary, J. B. Priestley in fiction, Arnold Toynbee in metahistorical speculation—shared this temperament. It even affects the later writings, the satirical fantasies, of George Orwell. Translated into focus on the bureaucratic establishment, it is a theme also in C. P. Snow's novels.

Britain hadn't recovered psychologically before the sixties, possibly the eighties, perhaps never, from those miserable photos of February 1942, showing slim, diminished, embarrassed British officers in their little khaki shorts surrendering Singapore to exultant, masterful Japanese generals, or those heart-stopping photos of smiling young British bomber crews about to leave for their near-suicidal night missions over Germany in 1943 and 1944 and the loss of 59,000 air crews, the cream of a generation, at least half of them secondary school and college graduates. In addition to these irreversible traumas, there was after 1945 souring national austerity, fuel shortages, food asperity, a humiliating subordinate satellite relationship with the United States, and ignominious retreat from the tropical Empire, where nothing was recovered from centuries of prodigious effort and idealism.

This was the sad ambience, the bitter, depleted world in which Lewis and Tolkien wrote. They had, however, a more positive response to these conditions and events than the postimperial stoicism, cultural despair, and resigned Christian pessimism that were the common response of their British contemporaries. They were not prepared imaginatively and intellectually to withdraw and accept defeat. Out of the medieval Norse, Celtic, and Grail legends, they con-



jured fantasies of revenge and recovery, an ethos of return and triumph. As Chaucer said in *Troilus and Criseyde*, they aimed to “to make dreams truth and fables histories.” A mythopoetic vision of medieval heroism was to be communicated to the masses through fantasy stories. “That something which the educated receive from poetry,” Lewis wrote in 1947, “can reach the masses in stories of adventure, and almost in no other way.”

## II

### THE MEDIEVAL IMAGINATION

Biographical studies of Lewis have slowly emerged. Most valuable are Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (1979), which, as the title indicates, is mostly focused on the 1940s scene in Oxford, and a 1988 book by George Sayer (*Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times*) that is memoir as well as biography and is uneven but informed and insightful in places. To these highly sympathetic biographies there has been added a more hostile portrait (*C. S. Lewis: A Biography* [1990]) by the prolific British novelist and biographer A. N. Wilson: Lewis “was argumentative and bullying. His jolly, red, honest face was that of an intellectual bruiser. . . . He was frequently contemptuous in his remarks about the opposite sex.”

In 1985 British television boldly presented a film, *Shadowlands*, depicting Lewis’s relationship with Joy Davidman, the American to whom he was married for five years. A stage play derived from the TV film has since been presented in London and New York. In the TV film, Claire Bloom was miscast as Joy Davidman. The actor playing Lewis, Joss Ackland, although taller than he was, did facially resemble him. Lewis was a handsome man in that heavysset British manner. He came through in *Shadowlands* as a generally wise and generous person and as extremely kind to Davidman’s two sons by a previous marriage (that was true), even paying for their attendance at an upscale boarding school.

*Shadowlands* communicates accurately that Jack Lewis brimmed with self-confidence. He had very firm opinions about everything, including the Middle Ages. For Lewis the quest for the Middle Ages was the pursuit of “the compulsive imagination of a larger, brighter, bit-terer, more dangerous world than ours.” In his view, this medieval imagination was the product of the tense interaction of three cultural traditions. One was the romantic tradition that attained its highest