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# Introduction

Interview with  
Michael Ward<sup>1</sup>

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*Michael Ward introduces the Westminster Abbey commemorations in an interview with Lancia E. Smith, who is a long-time supporter of The C. S. Lewis Foundation, the charitable organization that owns The Kilns, Lewis's former home in Oxford.*

*Lancia, a professional photographer, hosts a popular blog entitled "Cultivating the Good, the True, and the Beautiful" at [lanciaesmith.com](http://lanciaesmith.com). In early 2013 she interviewed Michael Ward about the forthcoming commemorative events in Westminster. The following is an edited version of their exchanges:*

22nd November 2013 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of C. S. Lewis's death. To honour his extraordinary contribution to the world of literature, Westminster Abbey will be unveiling a permanent memorial to Lewis in Poets' Corner and hosting a Symposium in recognition of his

1. Dr. Michael Ward is Senior Research Fellow at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford, and Professor of Apologetics at Houston Baptist University, Texas. He is the author of *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford University Press, 2008), co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), and presenter of the BBC television documentary, *The Narnia Code*. He maintains a web presence at [www.michaelward.net](http://www.michaelward.net).

accomplishments and his continuing influence on British national life.

It has been my privilege to interview Dr. Michael Ward, lead organizer of this fast-approaching celebration.

SMITH Dr. Ward, what is the significance of Poets' Corner—especially from a British point of view?

WARD Poets' Corner is perhaps the most famous part of Westminster Abbey. Over one hundred poets, novelists, dramatists, and other artists (including actors and musicians) are buried or commemorated there. The first poet to be buried in the Abbey was Geoffrey Chaucer, the "father of English poetry," in 1400. Others who have been honoured include Shakespeare, Wordsworth, the Brontë sisters, and Jane Austen.

To be memorialized in Poets' Corner means you've received national recognition for your contribution to the arts. Westminster Abbey has been at the heart of religious and civic life in England for over a thousand years and is known as "the coronation church." William the Conqueror was crowned there on Christmas Day 1066. Our present monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, was crowned there in 1953. So, for C. S. Lewis to be memorialized in the Abbey is an indication of the respect in which he is held and an acknowledgement of his enduring place in the world of English letters.

SMITH Why is this particular event significant—globally and within the community of Lewis scholars and readers?

WARD Globally, because Westminster Abbey is renowned worldwide and almost everything that happens there receives attention internationally.

It's significant among the community of Lewis scholars and readers because so much of that community has, hitherto, been based in America, and now things are beginning to even themselves out. In comparison to Americans, the British have been rather slow to recognize Lewis's importance. I don't say that the British have completely ignored him till now; he has always been reasonably popular here, but less so than in the United States. Part of that is simply to do with differences in

national temperament: the British (and, in particular, the English) are reluctant to make an enthusiastic noise about their favourite authors because we fear being mocked for it. “Moderation in all things,” tends to be the English way! Partly it’s to do with a strain of Anglophilia in certain parts of American culture. And partly, perhaps, it could be to do with the fact that “a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country.”

Another reason it’s significant within the community of Lewis scholars is because several attempts have been made over the years from within that group to have Lewis memorialized in the Abbey, and at last the Abbey has said yes. Dr. Stan Mattson of the C. S. Lewis Foundation had suggested it on previous occasions; I myself had tried back in 1998; I think various other people had tried too—and always the Dean of the Abbey, whose sole decision it is, had declined. But now the present Dean of the Abbey, Dr. John Hall, has graciously consented to the suggestion and it’s going ahead. So, I know that a lot of people within the community of Lewis scholars and readers will be pleased—delighted—and I think everyone who has petitioned the Abbey about this matter over the decades can consider themselves to have contributed to the present positive situation.

SMITH

In the official press release announcing this memorial, Vernon White, Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey, said: “C. S. Lewis was an extraordinarily imaginative and rigorous thinker and writer, who was able to convey the Christian faith in a way that made it both credible and attractive to a wide range of people. He has had an enduring and growing influence in our national life.”

There is a fairly widespread belief that Lewis was less well accepted by the British after World War II and was hailed as an evangelical hero in America. Neither side of this spectrum is really accurate. Obviously, the British people were deeply influenced by Lewis through his broadcast talks and his “popular” writings. And Americans went through a period after his death of declining interest in Lewis, which was later followed by a renewal of esteem that hasn’t waned. From your perspective, what is Lewis’s enduring and growing influence on British national life?

WARD

The most easily recognisable influence, I think, has been through the popularity of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Those books, and in particular the first, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, are very widely known in Britain. People have grown up knowing about Narnia and it's now an established point of reference in the culture at large. Several times in recent years, I've been watching BBC comedy programmes and have observed various comedians making jokes—usually friendly sorts of jokes, I'm pleased to say—which assume knowledge of magic wardrobes or how time stands still when you're in Narnia or the danger of eating Turkish Delight. And these comedians are right: everyone in Britain, pretty much, can be expected to know about these things. The Chronicles represent that aspect of Lewis's influence which is truly national and ubiquitous, and who can say exactly what that impact has been? All I can say is, from the reading I've done and from countless conversations I have with people over the years, that it's immeasurable and very largely positive.

The other aspects of his influence—his Christian apologetics (such as *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*) and his academic writings (such as *The Allegory of Love* and *A Preface to Paradise Lost*)—are more confined to particular groups within the nation. And there again, it's impossible to quantify. But many, many people have been brought into a Christian faith, or strengthened within an existing faith, by his writings and by his personal example; and many scholars, both Christian and non-Christian, have been inspired by his academic output. It's really remarkable how much of an influence Lewis has had, in his imaginative writings, his apologetics, and his professional works of literary criticism. By any standards, it's an outstanding achievement and an unparalleled range of influences.

Then, of course, there's an influence that is related to Lewis, but not directly part of his own life and work, I mean the *Shadowlands* story of his marriage and bereavement. This was first of all a BBC television film, then a West End stage-play, then a feature film starring Anthony Hopkins, and finally a BBC radio-play. The writer, William Nicholson, managed to get four iterations of the drama, which is quite extraordinary! A lot of people who may know very little about Lewis will have encountered *Shadowlands*, but of course the story has

been greatly simplified and dramatized and romanticized and actually bears only a fairly loose connection to reality. Still, it's part of the overall picture of Lewis's place in the British national consciousness, and worth bearing in mind. Lewis is widely thought of not just as a writer, but as a man who loved and lost, who suffered bereavement but still trusted in God. And although *Shadowlands* is very unreliable, it is at least right in those respects and has had a part to play in making Lewis known to certain people who might otherwise never have heard of him.

SMITH      How did the idea for this memorial come about?

WARD      The Abbey has an Institute for public education; it puts on lectures, debates, seminars, and other events of various kinds. One of the canons at the Abbey, Vernon White, thought that the fiftieth anniversary of Lewis's death would be a good time for the Institute to organise some sort of event focusing on Lewis's work as a Christian writer and apologist. Canon White got in touch with me to discuss ideas and, in consort with the Institute's Director, Claire Foster-Gilbert, we decided to have a one-day Symposium, featuring two lectures from leading Lewis scholars, plus a Panel Discussion in which a group of invited experts would assess Lewis's legacy for Christian apologetics in the twenty-first century. The Institute was already planning a programme of events for autumn 2013 under the title "Telling the Truth," and so we agreed to incorporate the Lewis Symposium within that larger undertaking.

And while we were talking about the Symposium, I asked whether it might not be an opportune moment to revisit the notion of a Poets' Corner memorial. Vernon indicated that the time could be ripe, and so I approached several friends and colleagues who agreed to be co-signatories to a letter that I wrote to the Dean, suggesting that very thing. The co-signatories were:

- i. Helen Cooper, Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at the University of Cambridge. She holds the professorial chair that Lewis was the first occupant of;<sup>2</sup>

2 Helen Cooper held Lewis's old Chair from 2004–14.

- ii. The then President of the Oxford University Lewis Society, Ryan Pemberton;
- iii. Alister McGrath, author of *C. S. Lewis, A Life*, and Professor of Theology, Ministry and Education at King's College, University of London;<sup>3</sup>
- iv. Michael Ramsden, Director of the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics;
- v. Dr. Judith Wolfe, Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford, and editor of *The Journal of Inklings Studies*.<sup>4</sup>

The Dean of the Abbey, Dr. John Hall, wrote back very positively and it was agreed that news of the memorial would be announced in November 2012, giving us a whole year to raise the money for it. The Abbey doesn't fund such memorials itself, so it is up to me, as the main initiator of the project, to find the necessary support from Lewis's readers and admirers round the world. Jason Lepojärvi, the current President of the Oxford Lewis Society, is helping oversee the finances.

Even a relatively small memorial, such as this one, costs a huge amount of money because anything that affects the fabric of the Abbey has to be of high quality, both in materials and design. Also, the Abbey requires, quite properly, an additional sum as a contribution to the ongoing maintenance of memorials. And finally, certain other incidental expenses also need to be met by supporters of the project (for instance, the cost of producing the Order of Service).

The names of contributors will be compiled into a list and deposited in the Bodleian Library in the University of Oxford, among the papers of the Oxford Lewis Society, so that future generations of scholars can see who helped this memorial to be realized. We won't mention the size of individuals' contributions, because we understand that people have all sorts of claims upon their giving and the amount you donate is not really the relevant thing. Any amount is very gratefully received, be it large, medium, or small. What we want is for

3 Alister McGrath is now the Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford, Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, and Fellow of Harris Manchester College.

4 Judith Wolfe is now Lecturer in Theology and the Arts, School of Divinity, University of St Andrews.

this list to demonstrate the extent of Lewis's readership; and it will also provide an opportunity for people whose lives have been deeply impacted by Lewis's work to put that on record in a permanent form in the library of the university where Lewis spent most of his career.

SMITH Can you tell me anything about the design of the memorial, and how it will be worded?

WARD It will be a flag-stone kind of memorial, embedded in the pavement of Poets' Corner. The exact size and shape and location will be decided by the Abbey authorities, taking into account the existing memorials and the space available and so on. Ptolemy Dean, Surveyor of the Fabric at the Abbey, will have oversight of all the practical details relating to its design and manufacture.

Regarding the wording: obviously Lewis's name and dates are the main things. As for a possible inscription from his own writings: I took soundings among Lewis experts and among the co-signatories to the letter, and the most popular option was the closing sentence of one his most famous addresses to the Oxford Socratic Club, the university debating society of which he was President for many years:

*I believe in Christianity  
as I believe that the Sun has risen,  
not only because I see it  
but because by it I see everything else.*

We put this suggestion to the Abbey and, after careful consideration by a committee that deals with these things, they approved the idea. It's an eminently suitable quotation, memorable, meaningful, not overlong, and with a beautiful balance to it. I will have a chance to explain some of the deeper thinking behind the choice in a note in the Order of Service, so that the congregation can understand the way it neatly ties together many different areas of Lewis's life and work. The fact that it comes from an address entitled "Is Theology Poetry?" makes it particularly apt for Poets' Corner, I think.

SMITH It's been fifty years since Lewis died and in that period his reputation has been developing in various ways. How would you describe what his legacy is and is becoming?

WARD It's too big and too varied to speak about in just a short answer. You only need to look at the huge numbers of books and articles that are published about Lewis every year to see the size of it. Some people dislike Lewis intensely. Some people simply dismiss him. But I think that the majority of those who engage with him seriously, even though they may disagree with him, find him stimulating, helpful, even inspiring in a number of different ways, as a scholar, as a thinker, and as a writer.

I think that, as time goes by, people are coming to realize that Lewis, whether you happen to agree with him or not, is a very substantial figure who needs to be reckoned with. His combination of intellect, imagination, and faith is rare. It's influential. At the very least, it's interesting. I think it's not insignificant that the publishing houses of Lewis's two universities, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, have in recent years begun to publish scholarly works that address and analyse his impact. OUP has to date published three titles on Lewis's writings, and CUP has published *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*. As time goes by and Lewis's readership shows no sign of waning—on the contrary, it only seems to be growing and deepening—he is coming to the attention of many people who wouldn't automatically regard him as worth consideration. But an enduring audience, fifty years after death, is unusual and can't be ignored for ever. And I think the fact that Lewis's great friend, Tolkien, is also showing no signs of disappearing from the cultural landscape reacts favourably on Lewis's own standing.

The two men together are now established, I think, as unavoidably major figures from the middle of the last century. If you want to understand the intellectual and imaginative history of the English-speaking world over the last sixty or seventy years, you have to take these two into account. They're becoming increasingly rooted as a pair of giants, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example, from the previous century.

SMITH What do you hope will be the broader outcome of this event and the memorial?



WARD The unveiling of the memorial is bound to receive a lot of media attention round the world, and I'm sure that that will result in people being introduced to or reminded of Lewis's works.

More generally, I hope the whole two-day memorial event will focus people's minds on carrying Lewis's legacy forward into the future and help engender ideas about how that might best be achieved. It's important in every generation for there to be talented artists, diligent scholars, and faithful apologists who are able to work both through argument and through story. By thinking about what Lewis achieved in these respects, people will be encouraged, I hope, to find ways of emulating and updating his example in the modern day.

SMITH I would imagine that you will feel a sense of satisfaction in seeing this accomplished. With this particular milestone in the Lewis community and the wide spectrum of Lewis admirers, what are you most pleased about and proud of?

WARD There are two things that most please me about this event. The first is that it's going to be international and will feature almost every conceivable constituency in what you might call "the Lewis world": people who knew him, people who worked with him, theologians and philosophers and poets who admire him, scholars who have studied and written about him, professors who have tutored and lectured on his works, priests and pastors and ministers who have handed on his wisdom, children who love Narnia, regular readers who just like his stories or his style, and so on and so forth. And I'm particularly pleased that it will involve people who knew him and worked with him, because their number, alas, is getting smaller every year. This is really the last chance for a gathering of this kind on such a scale.

And the other thing that especially pleases me is that this event is being organized by British people and in an Anglican context. Lewis himself was British and Anglican, and at last he is being commemorated by his countrymen in that setting, but with the whole world, as it were, welcome and involved at the same time. So many previous Lewis-related events have been principally American and Evangelical, and although those events have often been excellent and I've been proud to be

associated with many of them myself, this event is different. It feels like a sort of home-coming or a long overdue recognition. It's going to be, I trust, a very happy occasion for everyone who attends, wherever they come from and whatever their particular connection with Lewis. I count myself tremendously fortunate to have a role in helping bring it about.

SMITH      What will be involved in the two days?

WARD      During the afternoon and evening of Thursday 21st November, there will be four events:

- i. a lecture by Professor Alister McGrath, looking at how Lewis presented the Christian faith through rational argument;
- ii. a lecture by Dr. Malcolm Guite, looking at how Lewis presented Christianity through story and poetry;
- iii. a service of Choral Evensong—as happens every evening in the Abbey;
- iv. a panel discussion that I will chair, featuring William Lane Craig, Michael Ramsden, Jeanette Sears, Peter S. Williams, and Judith Wolfe.

Then on Friday 22nd November, there will be a Memorial Service, at which the Lewis memorial will be formally unveiled; Walter Hooper, Lewis's editor and biographer, will lay flowers on it. The service will feature hymns, prayers, and readings both from Scripture and from Lewis's works, including an audio-recording of his own voice reading a passage from *Mere Christianity* (a passage that, by a pleasing coincidence, contains the phrase "telling the truth"). There will also be a specially commissioned choral anthem, a setting of one of Lewis's poems, composed by Paul Mealor. The address will be given by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, and now Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge (the college where, of course, Lewis finished his career).

SMITH      Where will the Symposium events take place?

WARD The two lectures and the panel discussion will take place in St. Margaret's Church, which is right next door to the Abbey and is part of the overall Abbey foundation.

SMITH Will there be any official gatherings before or after the conference?

WARD Dr. John Hall will kindly be hosting a dinner for the lecturers and the panelists on the Thursday night in the Deanery. There'll also be a reception for a number of invited guests, after the Memorial Service, in the Jerusalem Chamber—a beautiful fourteenth-century room where the translators of the Authorised Version met in 1611, and where Henry IV famously died in 1413. The room can only accommodate about seventy people, so the guests will be mostly those with a particular connection to Lewis—relatives, colleagues, friends, former students, and so on.

SMITH Are there any final details you would like to add?

WARD I ought to add that the Westminster events will not be the only commemorations being held in England for the fiftieth anniversary of Lewis's death. There will be a day-conference at Magdalene College Cambridge, a celebratory event at Magdalen College Oxford, and the Oxford University C. S. Lewis Society will also be marking the occasion.

But as regards the Westminster events specifically: one very exciting piece of news, which I alluded to earlier, is that the Director of Music at the Abbey, Professor James O'Donnell, has suggested that a special piece of music, a choral anthem, be commissioned for the Memorial Service. He asked me to propose some passages that might serve for the libretto, so I pored over Lewis's poetry, looking for poems that were short enough and lyrical enough to be viable candidates for a musical setting. There were lots of contenders, of course, but eventually I settled on three possible choices ("Love's As Warm As Tears," "The Naked Seed," and "After Prayers, Lie Cold"), which I submitted to the Abbey for their consideration. I also suggested Paul Mealor as a suitable composer, having greatly admired his motet, *Ubi caritas*, which he wrote for the 2011 Royal Wedding; and James O'Donnell instantly agreed that

Paul would be a very fine choice. Paul consented to come on board and to work on that poem which was—very happily—the first choice of both the Dean and myself, namely “Love’s As Warm As Tears.”

An anonymous donor has kindly come forward to fund the commission and my hope is not only that this piece of music will bring beauty and creativity to the Memorial Service, but also that it will become a standard part of the choral repertoire in this country—maybe even throughout the world—and be performed long after these commemorative events have passed into history. The poem in question is suited equally, I think, to weddings and funerals, but is also apt for any religious service or musical concert that aims to celebrate human and divine love. The way the poem talks about love as being “as warm as tears”, “as fierce as fire”, “as fresh as spring”, and “as hard as nails”, makes it applicable in all sorts of circumstances. I suspect Lewis was wanting to allude to the four elements (water, fire, air, and earth) in those four descriptions. Subtly, he’s suggesting that love informs the entire cosmos, it “moves the sun and the other stars”—in Dante’s immortal line.

SMITH How can readers and Lewis admirers participate and help support this effort?

WARD If you pray, please pray that this whole project will be edifying and successful. If you want to attend the events, please feel free to come to London in person on 21st and 22nd November. And if you don’t pray or can’t come, then please at least make a donation or encourage others to do so! And please also spread the word in general through social media. We still need to raise nearly £15,000. Any money raised over and above the costs of the memorial will go towards a new C. S. Lewis Scholarship at the University of Cambridge.<sup>5</sup>

SMITH My thanks to Dr. Ward for his efforts to bring the Lewis Memorial to fruition and for his generous sharing in this interview.

5. Donations to the scholarship may still be made. Enquiries about how to contribute should be directed to [database@alumni.cam.ac.uk](mailto:database@alumni.cam.ac.uk).