

Travel and Adventure: C.S. Lewis - In his steps

by Ruth A. Hill

OXFORD, England - If author, Christian apologist and Oxford University don C.S. "Jack" Lewis had lived to see his Narnia tales become not only cherished children's literature, but also an early 21st century silver-screen success story, he probably would have been astonished. "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" garnered \$740 million worldwide. Had any of that take come into Lewis' hands, it's likely he would have given most of it away.

MAGDALEN COLLEGE - C.S. 'Jack' Lewis, author of 'The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,' was elected a fellow here at Magdalen College in 1925. He taught Medieval and Renaissance literature here until 1954. CNS Photo by Ruth Hill. THE KILNS - C.S. Lewis often entered his second-floor bedroom at The Kilns from this stairway. He purchased this home jointly with his brother Warnie in 1930. CNS Photo by Ruth Hill. WRITERS' WATER HOLE - The Eagle and Child Pub, aka the Bird and Baby, a watering hole frequented by Lewis and his literary group, The Inklings, who included J.R.R. Tolkien. CNS Photo by Ruth Hill. His was a simple life, we learned during a walking tour of sites Lewis frequented around Oxford. He didn't drive a car, took in orphans, animals and houseguests, and gave away half of what he earned. His greatest entertainment was intellectual and animated conversation and jousting, especially with friends such as J.R.R. Tolkien, whose "Lord of the Rings" also brought great posthumous fame and fortune.

Around town, Lewis cut the profile of the quintessential professor in a rumpled old tweed coat whose pockets had burn holes from his ever-present pipes. "The Professor," as his Oxford neighbors called him, had an unassuming demeanor and wasn't much for small talk. Yet he had many loyal friends. The storyteller and intellect behind the myths, the magic and the expositions was also often called a "country man" - a bit of a dig at his lack of elitism.

Yet when he died on Nov. 22, 1963 (the same day John F. Kennedy was assassinated), he left the world a legacy of allegorical literature and apologetics that has only burgeoned in appeal since his exit.

My traveling companion and I are Lewis admirers, so we included a couple of Oxford nights and a walking tour of his home turf into our recent ramble through England's Cotswolds region. As we walked in his steps, we gained a better understanding of the man whose words and teachings continue to magnetize fans of all ages. We slept two nights in the charming and strategically located Macdonald Eastgate Townhouse Hotel on historic High Street. The first evening in town, we had some pub grub at The Mitre, a fixture on the main drag where Lewis sometimes took a meal.

Our lodging put us inside the contemporary pulse of Oxford's medieval town and gown ambience and next to Magdalen College, where Lewis was elected a fellow in 1925. Originally a 17th century coaching inn with modern updates and a charming breakfast room, the Eastgate is where Lewis first met his future wife, Joy Gresham. In the film "Shadowlands," however, actor Anthony Hopkins as Lewis made the proposal to actress Debra Winger in the Eastgate's venerable sister hotel, Macdonald Randolph Hotel, where we had a white-cloth dinner following the day tour.

To begin our tour, our guide Terry Bremble recommended we take a taxi from Eastgate over to Headington Quarry, Lewis' suburban village neighborhood. That was home base for Lewis and his older brother Warren, "Warnie," from 1930 to 1963. The neighbors referred to the pair as "The Professor" and "The Major" in recognition of their academic and military vocations. The brothers were lifelong best friends and seldom seen apart. Warnie never married; Lewis' marriage to Joy was brief because of her premature death from cancer at age 45.

Inside the mid-19th century Holy Trinity Church, the Lewises sat in the same pew for Sunday morning and Evensong worship year after year. Ronald Head, a former vicar of the church, said the brothers attended most church social events, but few congregationalists in the immediate community were aware of Lewis' fame. Inspiration for "The Screwtape Letters," Head believed, came to Lewis while he was sitting in church during the World War II years. Opposite the Lewis pew are shimmering engraved glass Narnia windows, installed in 1991 to commemorate the church's famous connection. The windows feature the castle, the lion Aslan, a flying horse and other animals from the stories.

The brothers' final resting place is in the churchyard, amid tall pine trees and ivy-covered stone walls. The side-by-side graves are identified by simple stone markers that project no fame or notoriety. No hallowed Westminster Abbey crypt for this 20th century intellectual giant. He probably would have refused such an offer anyway.

As we strolled out the church gate, Bremble pointed to The Masons Arms public house across the street. Built in 1872, the old watering hole was well known to the Lewis brothers. Some speculated the two men often left church early because they wanted to enjoy a pint or two on their way home, as some of today's parishioners most probably do. The pub became part of the working-class neighborhood in the mid-19th century, where stone was quarried for local buildings, including those of the university.

The way to The Kilns, the former Lewis home, is a quiet residential street lined with middle-class brick homes and ivy-covered walls. Now owned by the California-based C.S. Lewis Foundation, the house was purchased by the foundation and rescued from oblivion in the mid-1980s.

Open for tour by appointment, it serves as residence for visiting Lewis scholars. Teresa Kipp, the American housekeeper in residence, welcomed us and showed us around the modest rooms where Jack, Joy, her two sons Douglas and David, Warnie, Mrs. Miller the housekeeper and Fred Paxford, the gardener, spare cook and general handyman, lived with a ginger cat and huge shaggy poodle. Built in 1922, the house was jointly purchased in 1930 by the Lewis brothers. Jack lived there until his death, as did Warnie, who outlived his younger brother by 10 years.

Though structural changes remain intact from Lewis' days, what Kipp presented us was a well-maintained, modest home with few similarities to the way it was. Still, as we looked at the rooms, a wardrobe in the upstairs hallway, a typewriter that Warnie used to answer Jack's correspondence, and a few of Jack's pipes on a sideboard, we sensed something of its famous resident.

"When Lewis lived," Kipp told us as we stood before the expansive window in the downstairs study, "the ceiling and walls in this room were coated with black residue from pipe smoke. Stacks of books and papers made it difficult to walk around. Blackout curtains from the war hung on the windows."

It was clearly a bachelor's enclave, she said - until Joy came along and made it more livable. Joy's bedroom was downstairs and apart from Jack's upstairs bedroom and study, which he often entered from an outside second-story staircase.

"Many who knew Lewis say his decor was his imagination," said Kipp, "and there was probably nowhere on this property that his imagination took flight more than it did on the lake and woodlands to the rear of the house."

Indeed, many have speculated that the Narnia tales were born near or maybe even from a boat on those waters.

We dodged the ever-present cyclists in Oxford's center city as we made our way into some of the university's awesome architectural treasures. Though the city has a youthful contemporary beat, its facade is medieval and unique. The ancient halls and walls, gardens and towers of the various colleges captivated us - for the centuries of history they hold and their Lewis connections.

Magdalen College's pastoral and open setting is due to its location outside the original city gates. Open and green, it has a riverside location and the peaceful Addison's Walk, which ends in front of a stone inscribed with a Lewis poem, "What the Bird Said Early in the Year." The college's great bell tower is one of Oxford's most prominent skyline features at 144 feet high. Built in the late 15th century of stone, the Magdalen Great Tower contains bells dating to the 17th century. On special occasions, they ring.

University College is Oxford's oldest center of learning, founded in 1249. Lewis left his native Belfast and entered it in 1917 with a scholarship. Originally devoted to students of theology, it is the location of the Divinity School, a stunning 15th century medieval building whose ceiling consists of elaborate Gothic fan vaulting.

Lewis listened to lectures in this hall and spent hours in the adjacent Bodleian Library, one of the world's greatest repositories of medieval literature, local history and early printing. The library joined the university in 1410, and in the 1600s it became a legal deposit library for copies of all books printed in Britain.

Inside another frequent Lewis pub stop on bustling St. Giles Street, we encountered more walls we wished could talk. The Eagle and Child pub - otherwise known as the Bird and Baby - was the favored watering hole for The Inklings, Lewis' famous group of literary friends who included Tolkien. Lewis wrote of the "golden sessions" - philosophical and literary conversations they had beside a blazing fire within the Rabbit Room. On a wall near the bar is a note to the landlord from The Inklings, written in 1949 during one of their meetings. It bears their signatures and states they have drunk to his health. It made me wonder, after so much posthumous success, what Lewis and Tolkien might talk about today if they were both still around.

IF YOU GO

The Tourist Information Centre, Oxford (www.visitoxford.org), arranges Lewis walking tours.

Independent visits at The Kilns are by appointment Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 1 to 4, and on Saturdays from 10 to 1. For more information visit www.cslewis.org, or e-mail TheKilns@cslewis.org for reservations.

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