



Mark A. Noll, *C.S. Lewis in America: Readings and Reception, 1935–1947*. With contributions from Karen J. Johnson, Kirk D. Farney and Amy E. Black. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023. xvii+156 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5140-0700-6.

This book by a noted historian of American Christianity and graduate of Wheaton College contains the edited and slightly expanded text of three lectures delivered as the Wade Center's Hansen Lectures for 2022, each followed by a response from a different scholar. It also contains a reprint of one fine early example of American Lewis criticism. The lectures themselves were an enlarged version of an essay published in 2021.

It is neither the first nor the most detailed or wide-ranging book about the reception of C.S. Lewis published to date, nor even about his reception in the USA. Noted predecessors are Alan Snyder's *America Discovers C.S. Lewis: His Profound Impact* (2016), George Marsden's *C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity: A Biography* (2016) and Stephanie Derrick's *The Fame of C.S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* (2018, based on a 2013 PhD). However, in a sub-field of Lewis studies that is not notoriously crowded yet, and given the abundance of relevant material, Noll's particular focus results in a contribution which readers interested in all (or most) of Lewis's work will find worth adding to the rest.

Thus the reprinted thirteen-page essay at the end is an 'Introduction to C.S. Lewis' by Charles A. Brady, a professor of English, published in 1944 in the Roman Catholic magazine *America* – an essay which earned Brady a letter of praise and thanks from Lewis for having 'really read and understood *all* my books'.¹ Readers who have also read Derrick's work, including its more comprehensive PhD version, may note that Brady is never mentioned there. In fact Brady's text provides a striking counter-indication for Derrick's suggestion that Americans were slow to develop informed ideas about Lewis. However, while Noll's work adds much to the picture presented in earlier reception histories, it also raises doubts as to whether this isn't a book about America rather than about Lewis, or whether the two intents are successfully combined.

The time period covered by this study runs from the first public reaction to Lewis's works in America, in a December 1935 review, till the appearance of his face on the cover of *Time* magazine almost twelve years later. Earlier American reviews are in fact available, even disregarding the two early volumes of Lewis's

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume II: Books Broadcasts, and the War 1931–1949*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 629.

poetry that appeared under the name Clive Hamilton, but they concern British editions, and in any case Noll makes no pretention to completeness. The years 1935–1947, he submits, ‘mark a distinct period for showing what American critical reactions to Lewis reveal about Americans’ (3). Three broad categories of American responses to Lewis are distinguished: Roman Catholic, Mainstream & Secular, and Protestant, serving as the consecutive topics for the three lectures and chapters. They also roughly represent the chronology of Lewis’s first rise to prominence in American consciousness and society. A further tripartite division is introduced through a list of U.S. publications of Lewis’s books in 1935–1947, putting each work under one of three headings: Literary Scholarship, Imaginative Writing, and Christian Exposition (5).² The three categories of readers are characterized partly by their exposure to, or preference for, each or all of the three genres of his works.

While some scraps of personal histories emerge in the course of the book, Noll has avoided repeating the work already done in that field by Alan Snyder. Responses to Lewis are here examined primarily for the light they shed on the state and development (including some later developments) of each of the three constituencies of Lewis readers, and of American society generally. In offering a diligently researched historical tableau, Noll has aimed to gain a clearer view of ‘the enduring qualities that have kept these works alive for so many readers in so many places’, so as to be finally able to offer suggestions as to ‘how the approaches Lewis modeled decades ago might assist believers in addressing the public today’ (6).

Initially, and for more than half of the covered period, Roman Catholic reviewers of Lewis’s works in America far surpassed any others in ‘breadth of treatment or depth of appreciation’ (10). Catholics welcomed them ‘for their literary brio, academic depth, imaginative creativity, and forthright Christianity’ (25) and for their ‘defense of objective truth and especially his depiction of humankind’s innate moral consciousness’ (28). One early and remarkably perceptive Catholic response was Thomas Merton’s review of *The Personal Heresy* in July 1939, three months after Oxford University Press published Lewis’s controversy with fellow literary scholar E.M.W. Tillyard simultaneously in Britain and the U.S.A. Relatively critical responses to Lewis tended to come from the clergy rather than the laity, and often concerned the downplaying of ecclesiastical differences by Lewis and his Catholic admirers. In this way the Catholic response to Lewis evinced tensions which ‘can be viewed as testifying to subterranean changes underway’ (37).

2. The list is, strangely, a slightly defective version of a more accurate one found online in the handout for Noll’s original first lecture: www.wheaton.edu/media/wade-center/files/news-amp-events/Hansen-Lecture1_handout_Noll.pdf

The final section of this chapter highlights an interesting incident regarding a detail in Charles Brady's reprinted 1944 text. Discussing Lewis's first science-fiction novel, Brady interprets the encounter between Ransom and the *hrossa* on Mars as 'an allegory of racial fear and repugnance and its sublimation into deep affection through the very recognition of the fact of difference'. Whether or not this is a peculiarly American take, Lewis in his letter to Brady accepted it as a happy instance of a book suggesting 'more than the author intended' (34). Noll does not note (as Snyder might have done) that Lewis, writing just a few months later to another American correspondent regarding the same book, asserted that 'What I meant' by a certain passage on the interplanetary meeting of rational species was a repudiation of 'Racialism'.³ Might this mean Lewis had made Brady's insight literally his own? However that may be, the Response following Noll's first lecture/chapter is devoted to interracialism in 20th-century American Catholicism. Karen Johnson's expert contribution on that subject is interesting but, at eighteen pages with hardly a word about Lewis, readers may feel this is more than they had bargained for.

Lewis's reception in secular and mainstream media (chapter 2) yields a rather different sort of revelation about Americans. Here we learn not so much about subterranean tremors presaging later developments as about a stark contrast with present conditions. Differences between then and now are noted in unmistakable tones of lament over a vanished 'American environment that still made room for at least some aspects of that traditional [Western Christian] culture' (58). The implication seems to be that there is no longer room today for any aspect of that culture in America, or at least in mainstream and secular America. W.H. Auden's enthusiastic 1946 review of *The Great Divorce*, a theological fantasy, was 'particularly discerning' as compared with the rest, but it 'spoke for almost all treatments in the nation's mainstream press' (65). The 'Christian themes Lewis advanced had nothing to do with political polemics' (68). The *Saturday Review of Literature* that carried Leonard Bacon's review of *Perelandra* in April 1944 had an image of Lewis on the front cover three and a half years before the Lewis-featuring *Time* cover.

When Lewis's works of straightforward Christian exposition reached secular and mainstream America, 'positive responses still outnumber[ed] the negative' (70). Some critics were in fundamental opposition to Lewis's quest for 'a single truth about humankind and the world' (78) but others were not, even as they rejected his conclusions. Noll suggests that the latter sort 'pointed backward', but adds almost immediately that 'for much of the reading public to our day, straightforward competing claims about *the truth* have remained very important, as indicated by the ongoing popularity of Lewis's book

3. C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume II*, 699.

Mere Christianity' (79). While important issues are raised here, they plainly call for fuller treatment. Noll proposes to leave an assessment of Lewis's philosophical position on naturalism to the professionals (78), but this policy is probably untenable if a definitive history of Lewis's reception is ever to be written. As Green and Hooper wrote long ago, Lewis's early philosophical training 'was not wasted' and 'gave weight to his later theological writings, and it is particularly apparent in such a work as *The Abolition of Man*'.⁴ More recently, Samuel Joeckel in *The Lewis Phenomenon: Christianity and the Public Sphere* (2014), proposed his concept of the 'public intellectual' and idea of a 'public sphere' that declined after the 1950s, explaining both the Lewis phenomenon and why it will never be repeated. In a 2010 article prefiguring the book Joeckel implicitly invited Noll to bring this view to bear on the case of Lewis:

Might Lewis's popularity in America owe something to his identity as public intellectual, since American Christianity, as Mark Noll [in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994) ...] observe[s], has historically tended to be populist in nature?⁵

Regrettably, Joeckel's solidly argued contribution to the issue at hand has been neglected both by Noll and by Derrick (although in her 2018 book she did briefly mention Joeckel). The ten-page Response to this chapter offers some compensation, giving an account of the careers of two deeply learned and hugely popular American radio preachers of the 1930s and 1940s: 'If C.S. Lewis was the "most challenging writer on religious themes" of the generation, [Fulton] Sheen and [Walter] Maier were arguably the most challenging *speakers* on religious themes of that generation' (86).

Among American Protestants, positive responses 'across the board' of mainline denominations reflect 'a substantial center' still largely unmarred by later 'fragmentation and liberalization among American mainline Protestants' (102); but 'the surprise is how late and how cautiously the evangelicals who would soon stand at the head of the line among Lewis's admirers responded to his works' (96). One interesting instance of strong but cautious early sympathy for Lewis from this sub-constituency is the case of Rev. Henry Welbon. At the time he wrote a review of *The Pilgrim's Regress* and sent it to Lewis and got a reply, in 1936, he was involved in a conservative Presbyterian secession centred on Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. While Welbon guessed

4. Roger L. Green and Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 1974/2002), p. 83 in original 1974 edition; 76 in revised 2002 edition.

5. Samuel Joeckel, 'C.S. Lewis, Public Intellectual', *Sehnsucht* vol. 4 (2010), 43–66, last paragraph.

Lewis was a Catholic, he wouldn't write him off. In fact the 'Westminster Presbyterians [...] were the only evangelical Protestants in the 1940s to engage with Lewis at any depth' (113). Some of these critics' chief doubts about Lewis's theological soundness concerned precisely the points that were dearest to Catholic hearts. In all, it remained a far cry from the later 'overwhelmingly dominant' evangelical story of 'appreciation for what Lewis did well, rather than worries about the exact shape of his theology or about his lack of evangelical credentials' (120). Hence Noll's question, 'how and why did the evangelical landscape shift between the mid-1940s and the late 1950s?' (114). The issue clearly concerns more than the rise of C.S. Lewis to stellar status among evangelicals, but is not unrelated: 'The few who responded positively to Lewis were themselves harbingers of a new day' (119). In fact, Lewis played 'a pivotal role [...] for individuals and groups deliberately turning aside from fundamentalism to embrace what they regarded as a fuller, more satisfying, and more authentically evangelical Christian faith' – a process resulting in the rise of a 'neo-evangelical generation' (121). Given the temporal limit set to the book, it is only logical that this account includes little more than a few small signs that 'change was in the air' (120).

But readers are left wondering if it was logical to set that limit at 1947 in the first place when the idea was to 'mark a distinct period'. While interesting as far as it goes, the book does not give a strong reason for stopping where it does if it was meant to tell a specifically American story of Lewis reception. The 1947 *Time* cover provides a fitting conclusion for chapter 2, but not necessarily for the book. As noted above, Noll never claims to be exhaustive even regarding the period dealt with, and like a good historian more than once warns against over-interpreting the material brought together here. Perhaps we do best to accept that a more ambitious project might have been unfeasible for practical reasons, that it is better to have something than to have nothing, and that (as Lewis famously argued) every historical demarcation line has its pros and its cons.

This last chapter – to which the five-page Response adds little – is concluded by a concise analysis, first of 'the qualities that made Lewis a phenomenon in America' in those early days, and then of 'circumstances that have changed since the 1940s' so as to 'affect the credible presentation of orthodox Christian faith in our own day'. The resulting outlook is less than promising, though not entirely pessimistic. Noll notes that 'appreciation among multitudes on the ground who value what Lewis exemplified does not translate up into a coherent force reframing general attitudes in the public sphere' – the essential problem being that 'the public sphere of the 1940s no longer exists and that the number of insistent voices demanding public attention has become so loud, so unforgiving, and so clamorous' (127). The book ends, somewhat surprisingly,

with a short meditation on Lewis's 1942 poem 'The Apologist's Evening Prayer'.

Noll has offered a valuable account of Lewis's early reception in America that is, though brief, as rich in facts and quotations as it is thought-provoking. And his very audible lament for the loss of 'a substantial center' in American Christianity and society easily wins this reviewer's sympathy from across the Atlantic. As for credible presentations of Christianity, it may be added that, just possibly, at least one feature of the American scene is perhaps more conspicuous when seen from afar than up-close. It is the secularization of Christianity in addition to that of society at large. To Europeans hearing of a *God Bless the U.S.A. Bible* peddled by a presidential candidate, it isn't as if there is no longer room in the United States for any aspect of traditional Christian culture. The secularizing rot appears to go deeper than that. Lewis, who tended to see 19th-century Britain as already post-Christian, had things to say about 'the decline of religion'.⁶ But we can receive his wisdom without the roundabout route of reception history.

Indeed, a more fundamental doubt is in place as to the precise merit of Noll's approach to his subject. Noticing what American responses to Lewis reveal about Americans is probably unavoidable for the historian, just as, say, Belgian responses to Lewis will reveal things about Belgians. But, even if Lewis has a greater name in America than in Belgium, it is not self-evident that Lewisian reception history is a particularly fruitful approach to national history. If we want to learn about Americans, it may be just as useful to study the reception of authors we are not otherwise interested in, or whose fame has faded, or who never achieved fame. Also, the national perspective calls for at least a handful of different national perspectives for comparison so as to make sure that this or that 'revelation' in one country isn't broadly similar in others, modifying their value in terms of national self-knowledge. It is in fact worth asking whether it is a good idea to put the reception history of any author (or composer, or artist, or such) at the service of any essentially different inquiry, or to attempt a structural combination of the two. The question gets urgent if the resulting revelations about Americans are in fact often geared to providing a tendentious contrast with the present day. The past is a foreign country. This means it is not Brobdingnag or Lilliput, fictions designed to shed a critical light on conditions at home.

6. See Lewis's 1946 short essay 'The Decline of Religion', in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 218–223; also, for example, a passage on 'the unchristening' of 'the West' (9–10) in Lewis's 1954 Cambridge inaugural lecture 'De descriptione temporum' in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1–14.

More specifically it might be asked what purpose is served by the threefold division both of Lewis's writings and of his American readership. This initial move leaves the reader with the *Macdonald Anthology* classified as 'Literary Scholarship', *The Abolition of Man* as 'Christian Exposition' and, more plausibly but still unhelpfully, *The Pilgrim's Regress* as 'Imaginative Writing' (5); and with Chad Walsh as (mainly) representing 'Secular and Mainstream Media' although his commitment to Lewis sprang up and grew in step with his commitment to Christianity and ordination in the Episcopal Church. Why not rather follow the chronological line of Lewis's American publications and responses to them and give pride of place to the patterns and connections, if any, that were noted by the readers? Is it because the preconceived threefold divisions make a shorter route to useful lessons for today? Perhaps they do, but the difficulties of combining this program with the historian's actual business have hardly been solved in this book. Perhaps they are usually insoluble. If the past holds lessons for today, we will not learn them unless the past is given maximum freedom to speak its mind. While a sequel to Noll's work is very welcome, whoever will undertake it is therefore best advised to adopt a more strictly historical approach – and take care to profit from the work of predecessors.

Arend Smilde

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