

Reflection -

Newsflash from Cair Paravel: C.S.Lewis was Irish!



When we ignore or gloss over major aspects of a person like C. S. Lewis—roots, religious affiliation, ethnicity—we diminish our own understanding of our subject, rendering the person less rich and less than complete - writes Deirdre Good, Academic Dean and professor of New Testament at The General Theological Seminary

Current Irish celebrations of the life and death of Clive Staples Lewis highlight a case in point.

November 22nd, 2013 was the 50th anniversary of his death in the UK. But his life began in Ireland. Lewis was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland on November 29th, 1898. His grandfather, the Rev. Thomas

Hamilton, Rector of St. Mark's, Dundela in East Belfast, baptized Clive Staples Lewis in St Mark's on January 29th 1899. Lewis' parents were from County Cork. His father Albert was a solicitor whose parents moved to Belfast to work in the shipbuilding industry and his mother Florence, "Flora," was the daughter of a Protestant clergyman who

served a parish in East Belfast. She studied at the Royal University of Ireland in Belfast where she gained First class Honours in Logic and Second Class Honours in Mathematics.

The Belfast Telegraph in a recent article, "Westminster Abbey honours CS Lewis

alongside literary elite 50 years after his death," (Nov 23rd, 2013)



identifies Lewis as Belfast's most famous literary son. In Belfast City Hall, a week of events recently marked Lewis' life and death. St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast has invited people to record in a leather-bound book (between Nov 22nd and Nov 29th 2013) how they have been influenced by Lewis' writings. It's website highlights Lewis' family



connection to the Cathedral: his uncle, Sir William Ewart and several of the Ewart family are commemorated there. On Nov 28th at Linen Hall Library in Belfast, local author Sandy Smith discussed his new 2013 book *C.S. Lewis and the Island of His Birth* investigating "his strong Ulster Scots links." The C. S. Lewis Festival programme identifies

Lewis' early religious affinities whilst in Ireland noting that after his father removed Lewis from Campbell College Belfast to send him to school at Malvern College in England in 1913, he became an atheist there at age fifteen. These are lively discussions of Lewis' identities. Indeed, the Irish celebrations clearly recognize the importance of his Irish identity and Church of Ireland affiliations but the

BBC report of the Lewis commemoration at Westminster Abbey labels him only as an author of the best-selling *Chronicles of Narnia* and as a respected Oxford scholar and literary critic. It fails to note his birth in Belfast and his Irish origins.

It is unfortunate but not surprising that English coverage glosses over the Irish roots of Lewis, but one wonders why there is so little mention

of it in the American media given the large Irish population in the US. Irish identities are complicated but Protestants have been in Ireland since the 16th C which is as long as Anglos and Hispanics and the French have been in the US and North America. Are we saying that only Irish Catholics are truly Irish?

To take Lewis' Irish character seriously is to recognize and define him as someone with two cultural identities: he was born Irish, and despite the fact that he resided and worked in England, he maintained an Irish identity: heaven in *The Great Divorce* is an "emerald green" land. Although Lewis lived most of his life as an Oxford and Cambridge scholar, his dreams were of Ireland as he notes in his diary, and he visited the north or the south of Ireland almost every year. Lewis once described heaven as "Oxford placed in the middle of County Down." In the Glens of Antrim (Northern Ireland) and in the golden sands of the Antrim coast at Portrush, Ballycastle and elsewhere, we glimpse Narnia. The Horse Bree in *The Horse and His Boy*, describes it: "The happy land of Narnia—Narnia of the heathery mountains and the thymy downs, Narnia of the many rivers, the plashing glens, the mossy caverns and the deep forests... Oh the sweet air of Narnia!" That Bree speaks of glens identifies an Irish (or Scottish, Welsh, or Cornish) landscape. What confirms Lewis' voice is the cadences of exile that Bree expresses—as Lewis himself does—in yearning for a distant homeland. Such longing became a theme connected to joy in his writings: in his book *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis says "All joy...emphasizes our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakens desire. Our best havings are wantings."

Irish currents run through the novels: to call Peter High King is to use historical Irish descriptions of High Kings of Ireland ruling over lesser kings and queens. Peter is High King in relation to Queens Susan, Lucy and King Edward in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

As for his own reflections, Lewis himself surmised that he wasn't recognized as an Irish author in his lifetime perhaps because he was a



self-identified Irish Protestant atheist not a Roman Catholic. Alistair McGrath, in his excellent new 2103 biography, *C.S. Lewis--A Life, Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, says, "many still regard Lewis as lying outside the pale of true Irish cultural identity on account of his Ulster Protestant roots." While McGrath discusses Lewis' various identities including his Ulster Protestant roots, his atheism, his conversion to theism and then

Christianity, and his Anglicanism, still other questions remain unaddressed: how did Lewis negotiate expressions of his dual cultures? Was he drawn to authors like William Butler Yeats, “an author exactly after my own heart,” he says in a letter to a friend, precisely because he wanted to investigate how Yeats “de-Anglicized” his own literary vernacular which he describes thus: “Yeats writes plays and poems of rare spirit and beauty about our old Irish mythology.” Lewis investigates Irish language in other poets: he sees in Spenser’s poem, *Faerie Queen*, the effects of Spenser’s sojourn in Ireland with its “quests and wanderings and inextinguishable desires, and Ireland itself – the soft, wet air, the loneliness, the muffled shapes of the hills, the heart-rending sunsets.”

A failure to recognize Lewis’ negotiated Irish identity is a failure to identify central interests of his life and writings. It is challenging to incorporate various religious and ethnic identities into our understanding of people but our lives and identities are indeed composite and irreducible. By recognizing the intricacies of Lewis’ ethnic and religious identity, we broaden and deepen the means by which we try to understand all aspects of his life and thereby we expand our own horizons.



Dr. Deirdre Good is Academic Dean and professor of New Testament at The General Theological Seminary, specializing in the Synoptic Gospels, Christian Origins, Noncanonical writings and biblical languages. Her blog is called [On Not Being a Sausage](#).

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