ForeWord Reviews

BIOGRAPHY

The Most Reluctant Convert: C. S. Lewis?s Journey to Faith
David C. Downing
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On a September evening in 1931, Oxford scholars Jack Lewis and Ronald Tolkien talked late into the night. They discussed myth and metaphor and grappled with Lewis's religious issues. Ordinarily, such a late-night confab would be of little historical significance, but this was C.S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. According to the author, it might well have been a defining experience in Lewis's life, for just a few days later the thirty-three-year-old philosopher re-converted to Christianity.

Born in Ireland in 1898, Clive Staples Lewis was, with his brother Warren, raised a Christian. After the early and tragic death of their mother, the boys were shipped off to boarding school where young Jack, as he preferred to be called, turned toward atheism. He developed a view that the universe is a random cosmic event and religion nothing but a futile attempt to fend off fear and desperation. In the trenches of World War I, Lewis spent his own desperate hours, boasting later that he "never sank so low as to pray."

Although he is one of the foremost Christian writers of the twentieth century, there is little scholarly study of Lewis's spiritual life. In his own writing, Lewis recounts his childhood, then fast-forwards to his middle years; his biographers have followed suit. In this narrowly focused study, Downing, Professor of English at Elizabethtown College and author of *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*, trains a close lens on Lewis's journey from atheism to Christianity.

Taking a careful look at Lewis's inward pilgrimage, Downing portrays a young romantic whose spiritual evolution was shaped by the early death of his mother, his estrangement from his father, the surreal violence of trench warfare, and an intense interest in the occult and paranormal. In Downing's view, it is not surprising that Lewis took years to reconcile his myths and dreams with life's grim realities.

Regarding the final leg of Lewis's journey, his re-conversion to Christianity, Downing doesn't isolate one dramatic moment. Instead, he describes a two-year process that begins with a mystical experience while riding a bus in the summer of 1929, and culminates on a ride in the

side car of his brother's motorcycle in September, 1931, just days after his talk with Tolkien. Though clear and accessible, Downing's narrative is more for the serious student of Lewis than the general reader.

Rob Mitchell