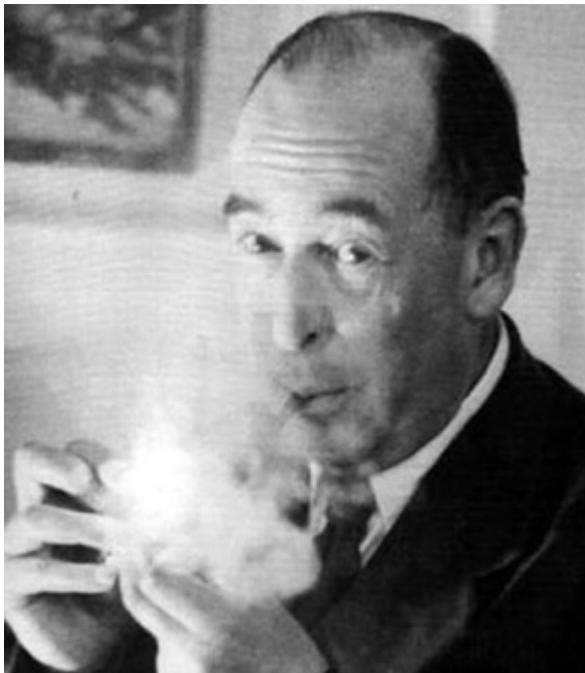


C.S. Lewis' legacy greater in U.S. than in his homeland

November 8, 2013

CANTERBURY, England (RNS)—When Clive Staples Lewis died on Nov. 22, 1963, hardly a soul blinked in Northern Ireland, where he was born, or in England, where he spent most of his working life as one of the world's greatest Christian apologists.



Lewis was a don at Oxford University specializing in Renaissance literature, as well as an author and Christian apologist. (Photo: Courtesy www.CSLewis.org) Lewis suffered a heart attack at his home in Oxford one week short of his 65th birthday. The obituary writers barely noticed his demise, in part because he died the same day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.

Lewis may be the most popular Christian writer in history, with millions of copies of his books sold—the vast majority in the United States, where his influence is far greater than in his native country.

Was it Lewis' modesty or British fear of discussing religion that fueled such indifference in Britain and Ireland?

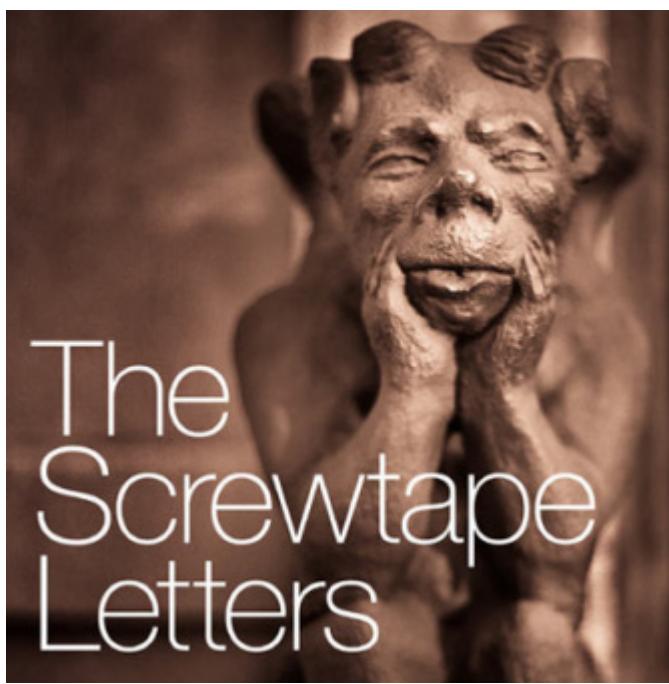
A mixture of both, said Paul Johnson the prominent British journalist, author and former editor of *New Statesman* magazine.

Writing in the *Catholic Herald*, Johnson, a leading British Roman Catholic, said he first met Lewis when he was a student at Magdalen College, Oxford University, where Lewis was a don, specializing in Renaissance literature.

'I had no idea he wrote stories'

"When I knew him, just after the Second World War, he was famous for his work in English literature," Johnson wrote. "When we went for walks together, we discussed Chaucer and Dickens, Shakespeare and Dryden. *The Chronicles of Narnia* were never mentioned. Indeed, I had no idea he wrote stories."

Half a century later, his books sell between 1.5 million and 2 million copies a year.



'The Screwtape Letters' is a wry

and insightful correspondence between an old devil and his younger apprentice. (Photo: Courtesy of Harper Collins) Lewis was born in Belfast on Nov. 29, 1898. His father, Albert James Lewis, was a lawyer; his mother, Florence Augusta Lewis, was the daughter of an Anglican vicar. She died of cancer in 1908.

Shattered by her death, Lewis abandoned his inherited faith at age 15 and threw himself into a study of mythology and the occult.

In 1916, when he was just 17, Lewis was awarded a scholarship at University College, Oxford. World War I was raging, and the following year, he joined the army.

He served in the Somme Valley in France with an English infantry division and experienced the horrors of mass slaughter. He was wounded when a British shell falling short of its target killed two of his colleagues.

After the war, he returned to Oxford, and in 1925 was elected a fellow and tutor in English literature at Magdalen College, where he served until 1954.

Conversion to Christianity

His conversion to Christianity was slow and laborious. Reluctantly, he fell under the influence of Oxford colleague and friend J.R.R. Tolkien and G.K. Chesterton, who met every Tuesday morning at a local public house in Oxford and formed a debating club called "Inklings."

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis said the night he turned from atheism to Christianity he became "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

Tolkien and Chesterton were disappointed their new convert turned towards the Church of England, not Rome.

Lewis went on to write acclaimed books about Christianity—*The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles* and *The Problem of Pain*—the latter written after he watched his American-born wife, Joy Davidman Gresham, die of bone cancer in 1960.

The following year, Lewis experienced medical problems, and on Nov. 22, 1963, he collapsed in his bedroom. He is buried in the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church, Headington, near Oxford—now a place of pilgrimage.



'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,' a high fantasy novel by C. S. Lewis, spawned a series of recent 'Narnia' films. (Photo: Courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures) Celebrations of his life are being held throughout November in Belfast. On Nov. 22, he will be honored with a memorial in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, where the kings and queens of England are crowned and where some of the world's greatest writers are buried.

His friend Johnson said Lewis, along with Tolkien, provide a counterbalance to the enormous flood of atheist literature and as an alternative to other children's literature.

"It is one of Lewis' great merits that his tales can be read with equal pleasure by teenagers and grown-ups," said Johnson. "He is thus, in a sense, the answer both to Richard Dawkins and Harry Potter."