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## *A Solid Man*

LUKE RIGBY, O.S.B.



**A**FTER ALMOST THIRTY YEARS, my recollections of C. S. Lewis will be hazy, to say the least. Since Mr. Lewis's renown has spread way beyond expectation, I must beware of fantasy, of gathering into my recollections impressions I have gained from subsequent hearsay and reading.

I went up to Oxford in October 1944 to read English. I was at Saint Benet's Hall, a private hall where the young monks of Ampleforth Abbey, as well as those of other English monasteries, lived and attended the university. It was an Oxford decimated by war but steadfastly maintaining an academic program. Mr. Lewis agreed to be my tutor, since his college, Magdalen, lacked students to fill his schedule.

The relationship of tutor and undergraduate in the English school in those days was a simple one: they met each week for an hour; the undergraduate read to the tutor an essay assigned the previous week; the tutor would comment on the essay and would add his own reflections upon the subject at hand; finally a subject would be assigned for the following week, together with a reading list. I suppose it was the ultimate in self-study. Mr. Lewis tutored me in English literature, covering mainly the Elizabethan and Restoration Dramatists and John Milton.

I will divide my recollection into three: of the man, the tutor, the lecturer.

Mr. Lewis was no academician in the narrow sense. In appearance and manner, he was hale and hearty—a big man, ruddy of complexion, rarely

separated from his pipe in tutorials and often with a mug of beer. He dressed in tweeds and flannels (jacket and trousers, respectively) verging on the shabby, and I have a strangely detailed memory of a tattered pair of carpet slippers. His appearance both reflected and belied the man within. It reflected the warmth and geniality of the man—a true kindness that soon put a green and overawed freshman at his ease; it reflected a straightforward and down-to-earth condemnation of the pseudo—the shoddy and the insincere.

On the other hand, it belied the depth of his learning that I was early to witness; it belied, too, the poetic and personal sensitivity that was evident in his perceptive enthusiasm and appreciation of beauty in words; in particular I think it belied what I was but dimly aware of at the time, the sensitive and lonesome man of vision. What stands out in my memory is the warmth of the man. He was always welcoming and showed total interest and concern. The startling contrast between his achievement in the world of literature and my mediocre promise did not open a gulf; he was the true master, the true teacher. He shared his appreciation and enthusiasm and thereby instilled confidence and demanded effort; to some extent he was a hard taskmaster but that seemed good. I cannot say I was close to Mr. Lewis on a personal level as was one of my undergraduate friends in Magdalen. I was his pupil for a year only and finding my feet in college. I did not know him as counselor and friend, a role he had for not a few undergraduates.

Before I went up to Oxford, a warm and wise counselor with perhaps a sombre cast of mind said to me: “The university will be for you a lesson in humility. What you may learn of your subject will not compare in value with what you learn from being in contact with minds immeasurably more gifted than your own; you will marvel at the potential of the human mind.” Mr. Lewis provided me with my first and most abiding lesson in this sphere. Again, the recollection I have is superficial, but I hope it conveys something of the quality of Mr. Lewis’s learning. He would call upon me to read my essay, as often as not busying himself with the selection of a pipe and then filling and lighting it; it didn’t take long to realize that such extraneous activity didn’t impair his listening. He would sit there and comment in detail on the essay, correcting this or that, elaborating on a theme, proposing an entirely different theory or simply pouring out his own reflections on the particular author or work. To note it all down with

out shorthand was a feat. He never referred to a text, all the while illustrating his points with hearty declamations of some minor Elizabethan tragedy or a remarkably sensitive rendering of the verse forms, say, in *Samson Agonistes*. I clearly recollect coming away without depression and yet so aware of how little I had perceived (and not infrequently how facile had been my perception) after Mr. Lewis had shared something of his vision with me.

My recollections of Mr. Lewis as a lecturer who invariably filled his lecture hall are not so vivid. I heard him lecture mostly on the medieval background to English literature; this was very much the same material that he used in *The Allegory of Love*. I recollect struggling to absorb the closely reasoned, profusely illustrated material. Invariably I would have to go back to *Allegory* to try and sort it out or would have to seek elucidation from him at my next tutorial. I was under no illusions about where the limitations lay; however I believe Mr. Lewis was more adept with a pen in his hand or on a one-to-one basis round the fire in his rooms at Magdalen.

Rarely did the question of theology or churchmanship blossom into prolonged discussion. I had not started my theological studies and found my energies well absorbed in literature. It is hearsay to talk of his absorbing interest in and concern for the Christian faith. I do recall indirect references that showed a deep knowledge of the works of medieval theologians, notably St. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Of course, his circle of friends included several medievalists, among them the Dominican theologian, historian, and lecturer, Father Gervase Mathews. It is one of those quirks of memory that I recall a clerihew said to have been Mr. Lewis's on Father Gervase:

Father Gervase  
 Makes inaudible surveys  
 On little-known sages  
 Of the Middle Ages.

Perhaps I can end with that. He was a man with friends—this is well known. Though I was in a different league, I know why he had friends. The kindness, sensitivity, the zest for life, the fun, the deep sense of humor, the seriousness, the depths, the unexpectedness: they combined to make a man who was exhilarating to be with.