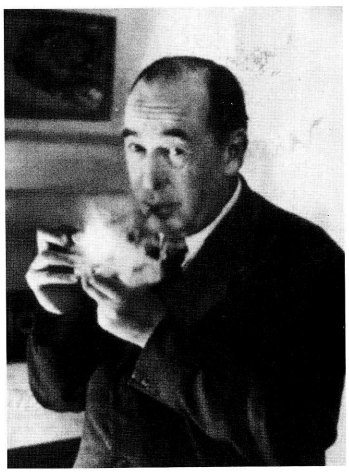
A Blessing on C. S. Lewis's home in Oxford, The Kilns

It is a great honour to be asked today to say a few words as we share this service of thanksgiving and dedication of The Kilns, the home from 1930 to 1963 of my supervisor and friend C. S. Lewis, when and where on Friday, November 22, he died a week before his sixty-fifth birthday. Apart from a week or two, my age today.

This service, then, is also my own personal thanksgiving for all he taught me and shared with me as we met regularly, for over two hours, every Wednesday morning in term in his college rooms in Cambridge. But I was only one, very young and very minor, friend. During that time I did not know The Kilns. Older and far longer friendships were enjoyed there: with Hugo Dyson, Charles Williams, Tolkien, all those unfolded so succinctly and evocatively in Walter Hooper's revised edition, recently published, of Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper's *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (HarperCollins, 2002) and also in the three volumes of Lewis's letters now published.

He had a gift for friendship, perhaps an unusual one. The emotional side, in my case, was reserved entirely for letters. Face-to-face, he was not emotional at all. People reading the letters that he wrote to me, with their lengthy and meticulous annotations of my poems, or telling me of his illness, say, "What a close relationship." But it was only so on paper; personal contact was for debate – the trying out of ideas: the exploration of joint enthusiasms, even, though largely in a factual way. He was not cold; he was disciplined;



C. S. Lewis

courteous; well mannered; eager for debate – debate in which the egos were not involved, and all energy was intent on what he called 'pursuit of the fox, truth – that elusive quarry'.

From him I learned every time we met. As the relationship was one between teacher and pupil, this was a gift more precious than gold. It was not quite the same among colleagues in the Oxford Magdalen Senior Common Room, who may not always have wanted debate over lunch and logic based on facts. Not that Lewis forced himself on people at all, but he did not like cant or sloppy emotion. One must not exaggerate this – he had a long and warm and happy experience of Magdalen, Oxford, and we must not forget that. He also had that at Cambridge. In the Senior Combination Room of Magdalene College, Cambridge, he found congeniality, even if the same, I'm afraid, could not be said of the Cambridge English Faculty, riven as it was, as I well remember, by faction. But in his two Magdalens he could find that collegiality that he so loved. In college, at Cambridge and Oxford, and at The Kilns, he found true collegiality, places where each person respects, helps, shares, and delights in the work of each, and problems are shared. This is what The Kilns can be, now that the C. S. Lewis Foundation under, if may say so, the inspired direction of its president, Stan Mattson, has been restored. Not a museum, but a living *locus amoenus*, a delightful place of hospitality where likeminded scholars can appreciate what it meant to Lewis and, in turn, like Castiglione and his Urbino, bring out the best in us.

For thirty-four years in my college rooms here in Oxford I have looked out on Erasmus's Arch, in New Inn Hall Street, which used to be called "Seven Deadly Sins Lane." Teaching in my rooms, walking up and down and glancing out of the window, my eye would fall not only on Erasmus's Arch but on the buildings beyond, now called Frewin Hall, but in Erasmus's time, St Mary's College. In October 1499, Erasmus arrived in Oxford with a letter of introduction to a lecturer two years his senior, John Colet, who was addressing large audiences here on the epistles of St Paul. Erasmus stayed at St Mary's College, the timber roof of which is now the roof of Brasenose College Chapel with a superb added plasterwork of the 1650s by John Jackson.

St Mary's was founded by Thomas Holden and Elizabeth, his wife,

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primarily for canons of the Augustinian Order. Erasmus wrote a letter to John Sixtin about a dinner party which, though Sixtin was invited, he was unable to attend. Colet, later dean of St Paul's, the affectionately respected leader of the Oxford circle, presided. On his right sat William Charnock, who was the prior of St Mary's. On his left was an unnamed divine, who was an advocate of the old scholasticism. Next to him sat Erasmus; as Erasmus said in the letter, 'so that a poet should not be wanting at the banquet.' Erasmus, at this stage, still saw himself primarily as a poet.

We all know what grew out of these debates over the dinner table in this small community and others like it: the English Reformation, with all its political complexities, English humanism, and the bringing in, by such men as Colet, of the Florentine Platonism that in my own subject was to flower in the poetry of Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and so many more. From such meetings of minds scholasticism, humanism, Platonism, overlapped and reshaped our outlook.[1]

[1] For an example of Warner's contribution to Renaissance Latin studies in the early sixteenth century see Francis R Le P Warner, 'Das Gedankengebäude des Agrippa von Nettesheim,' ANTAIOS, Band v, no 2, Juli 1963, Stuttgart, Ernst Klett Verlag, pp 122–142.

The Kilns has just such a future. It is ideal. Its inspiration is a single man – a great Christian who was, and is, an inspiration to millions. Its location is Oxford – still today the centre of the intellectual world, a position which it shares with its younger sister, Cambridge. Its attraction to like-minded inquirers has started in such modest beginnings as began many of the colleges around us now: like-minded scholars seeking after truth, sharing an environment, and becoming friends; collegiality, books, gardens, leisure, shared meals, above all, conversation; but more. Let me give you two anecdotes about C. S. Lewis that demonstrate his ideals; ideals that can guide the future of The Kilns. One is academic, and the other is personal.

We have all here heard and read about the Inklings, but today I want to remind you of another group: and anyone seeking a topic for research might like to explore this further. This other group was simply called The Society. It met once a term with a different host in a different college each time, and the host had to read a paper which started the discussion of the evening. The minute book of the Society is right behind me in the Bodleian Library. It contains a feast of material. John Bayley gave a talk on Shakespeare's puns on the word 'will'. Sir Thomas Armstrong bent the rules and entertained everybody to a visit to Covent Garden to watch Margot Fonteyn and Nureyev dance. John Sparrow, Tolkien, many of the familiar names were members.

I had tea a few days ago with Jonathan Wordsworth, my colleague. For a while he was the secretary of this Society. When his turn came to entertain the group, in Exeter College, he chose as his topic one that Lewis rather liked, called 'quaintness'. Lewis was a regular and sometimes a rather brooding presence. Nevill Coghill was the ideal host: facilitator, master of ceremonies, meeting all with his boundless goodwill and Irish charm.

And the second anecdote is this: Last week I also saw my old colleague, Douglas Gray, and he told me that Frank Quinn (Is Frank Quinn present, by any chance, before I tell this anecdote? You never know in Oxford.) had been a postgraduate research student at Magdalen in the 1940s. He was one of the very first. The don assigned to him, responsible for his well-being, was C. S. Lewis, of whom he was terrified. At the end of term, Lewis summoned

him to Staircase Three of Magdalen's New Buildings, outside which, as Lewis described in a letter to his own father, he could see "one little stag (not much bigger than a calf and looking too slender for the weight of its own antlers) standing still and sending through the fog that queer little bark or hoot which is these beasts' 'moo.' It is a sound. . . as familiar to me as the cough of cows in the field at home."

When Frank Quinn had knocked, wearing of course his gown, and entered, Lewis asked how he was getting on.

> 'It's quite difficult, really, but I'm working hard,' said Quinn, 'and the work's progressing.'
>
> 'I mean socially. Have you made any friends?'
>
> 'Not really. What with a wife and small child, and coming to Oxford from outside and being stretched over money, because of that I don't socialize much.'
>
> 'Oh, don't worry about that. I have a fund set aside from royalties. You can borrow as much as you like to help you through, and there's no need to pay me back until you can afford to.'

Two anecdotes – so typical of Lewis. We remember Wordsworth's comment in 'Tintern Abbey':

> . . . that best portion of a good man's life,
> His little nameless, unremembered acts
> Of kindness and of love . . .

though they are remembered by his pupils and the recipients. Two anecdotes to show the outside and the inside of collegiality; and all is based on reciprocal relationships.

To end, I will quote Lewis's favourite sentences from Cicero's *De Amicitia:*

> Those people are worthy of friendship who have within their own souls the reason for their being loved . . . It is characteristic of true friendship both to give and to receive advice, and on the

> one hand to give it with all freedom of speech but without harshness, and on the other hand to receive it patiently and without resentment.

And lastly –

> Friendship was given by nature as the handmaid of virtue, not as the comrade of vice, because virtue cannot attain her highest aims unattended, but only in unity and fellowship.

So, may the warm hospitality and environment of The Kilns bring the blessing of such union and fellowship. In one hundred years' time there will perhaps be another such service of thanksgiving for the dedication that brought this Christian community into being. Small in size it may be, but in power and preciousness it will transcend all man-made memorials to Lewis. It is a living inspiration, and the remembrance of a great soul.