

# C.S. Lewis a writer for all times, but his faith puts some people off

**O**XFORD, England — The measure of a great writer is not how many weeks his books spend on the best-seller lists, but how many years his books remain in print after his death. Keith Clack, a manager of Blackwell's bookstore, tells me that C.S. Lewis is one of the few writers whose entire literary output remains in print so many years following his death.

More than 1,000 people are gathered in Oxford and Cambridge for two weeks to celebrate the life and legacy of C.S. Lewis on the 100th anniversary of his birth and the 35th anniversary of his death.

Lewis was not a writer only for his time but for all time. He refused to be a part of what we would call "culture," speaking instead to themes and ideas that transcend all times and cultures.

The best the British government could do to commemorate this occasion was issue a stamp. It seems embarrassed to honor Lewis in a way befitting his stature, perhaps for reasons similar to those that denied him a professorial chair at Oxford: fame (which was not sought) coupled with his persuasive arguments about the existence of God. In debates

beginning in 1942 at the world-renowned Oxford Union, Lewis took on all comers, including atheists, and won. Five years later, he was on the cover of *Time* magazine, which dutifully recognized his genius in literature and apologetics.

Lewis never shouted. His way was one of persuasion, whether gentle, as in his marvelous "Chronicles of Narnia" children's stories (with profound implications for adults who read them to their children) or sharp, with rapiers to pierce the strongest hides of unbelief, as in "The Screwtape Letters" in which one demon instructs another on how to make a mess of human lives, or "Mere Christianity," which begins on the common playing field of logic and takes the reader on a journey that leads straight to God. As a former atheist, Lewis knew the potholes and wrong turns along the way.

Dr. Thomas Howard, chairman of the English Department at St. John's Seminary College in Boston, described Lewis' legacy as "muscular." In an age of easy believism (and easy nonbelievism), cheap grace and oversimplification of faith, Lewis has a muscular intellect that forces a reader to focus on ultimate truths. Howard also noted Lewis' "modesty, ebullience and deep sincerity," a man who "had a vision of heaven and hell" and who had "no time for humbug."

But no one speaks for Lewis better than Lewis himself. About our preoccupation with materialism, Lewis said in "The

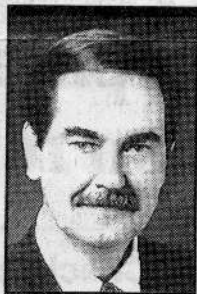
Screwtape Letters": "Prosperity knits a man to the world. He feels that he is 'finding his place in it,' while really it is finding its place in him."

To those attempting to "revive" a nation through politics, Lewis' demon instructs his young charge on how to corrupt his assignment: "Let him begin by treating the Patriotism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the 'cause,' in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce .... Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing."

Seeking to separate his readers from their fixation on the now, Lewis wrote: "Nations, cultures, arts, civilization — these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat."

The proof is that fads and fancies of Lewis' time have faded and so will ours. But Lewis' ideas are for all time. The advice of those attending this celebration of a great life well lived would be to turn off the television, start reading C.S. Lewis and be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

*Cal Thomas writes for the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, 218 S. Spring St., Los Angeles CA 90012.*



By **CAL THOMAS**