

EXCERPT

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The Last Romantic

C. S. Lewis, English Literature, and Modern Theology

January 28, 2025 | \$22, 176 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1051-8

Jeffrey W. Barbeau (PhD, Marquette University) is professor of theology at Wheaton College. A theologian, literary critic, and historian, he is the author of numerous monographs, anthologies, and edited books, including *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion*, *The Spirit of Methodism: From the Wesleys to a Global Communion*, and *Religion in Romantic England: An Anthology of Primary Sources*.

The Romantic Influences of C. S. Lewis

I thought for a long time that C. S. Lewis was something of a rationalist. The air of confidence implicit in titles on notoriously knotty subjects such as pain and miracles. The simplistic analysis of Jesus as liar, lunatic, or Lord. The tendency among some to use his works as a foil against an encroaching liberalism, always available with a pithy quote to settle a troublesome controversy.

All this left me a bit uneasy. But what if Lewis wasn't like that caricature at all? As I explain in this book, I had good reason for my apprehension, but it was only after I came back to Lewis's works—after years steeped in modern theology and British Romantic literature, just as Lewis was himself—that I figured out why.

In my first foray into the subject, I taught a class on C. S. Lewis and modern theology. I blanched when, on our first evening together, I learned that many of my most eager students appeared to know Lewis's works better than I did! I owe much to them, for while some already had a thoroughgoing grasp of the major plot points, characters, and themes, they cheerfully pressed on through our rigorous schedule, as we paired each new book with major theologians for discussion throughout the semester. We read through the bulk of Lewis's works together, and I found myself rereading almost every book we studied multiple times as I sought a greater grasp of Lewis in his intellectual context.

Next, I threw myself into the archives of the Wade Center. I began by reading what others had said about Lewis and Romanticism. The results were mixed and not especially promising. I already had an inkling of what I wanted to say about Lewis, but I worried that he could sometimes mention a name or idea with little or no indication of his purpose. I still required the sorts of connections that I knew from experience only time spent in an archive can produce.

There are hundreds—nay, thousands—of such books in the Wade archive. To be sure, I did not examine marginalia in every volume of Lewis's personal library in preparing my lectures, but I did work painstakingly through an extraordinary range of his library in works related to eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century literature, as well as many of his theological and philosophical tomes from these and other periods. As a result, I came to see that Lewis was not only familiar with the questions of his own age, but also reflecting and even responding to many of the same issues in his most well-known prose.

Three pivotal ideas emerged through this meticulous, systematic process. First, Lewis often approached some of the most challenging questions of Christian thought through the lens of the personal. Far from offering readers dogmatic assertions about faith, Lewis often began with experience, intuition, and religious feeling. This certainly reflected both the British Romantic movement, which I found him citing at every turn, and the spirit of his own times. In the first chapter, I take up this idea, showing that Lewis not only relies on the British Romantics far more than many might expect (given his scholarly reputation in medieval and Renaissance literature), but he also writes with an awareness of the legacy of modern philosophy and the so-called "subjective turn" that shaped much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

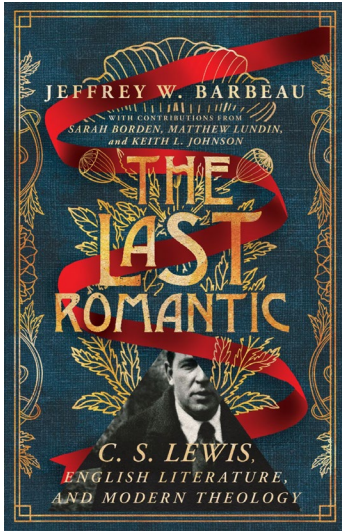
Second, Lewis enjoyed an uneasy relationship with spiritual autobiography and what scholars today call, more broadly, "life writing." While he complained that his own efforts in the genre were "suffocatingly subjective," Lewis appealed to the great tradition of conversion narratives and other forms of autobiographical writing to introduce Christian thought to a wide



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audience. In this, Lewis reflects many of his Anglican forebears, including the Methodists John and Charles Wesley, as well as the life writings of British Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth. In fact, as I explain in the second chapter, just as Lewis was deliberating theism (and Christianity) as a viable option for his own life, he was also reading deeply in the philosophical theology of Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Third, I was struck repeatedly while reading Lewis's works by just how often he discusses the natural world. His fiction often shows an acute interest in the description of landscapes, and in nonfiction works he makes reference to a love for nature that, at the very least, raises decidedly modern questions about how an appreciation for beauty relates to our knowledge of God. In such a light, as I show in the third chapter, Lewis's repetition of British Romantic ideas of imagination, visionary dream states, and symbols stands out as a major feature in his works. Indeed, by bringing Lewis into conversation with the British Romantics, the theological motivation behind his commitment to narrative—to the transformative power of story itself—begins to make sense.

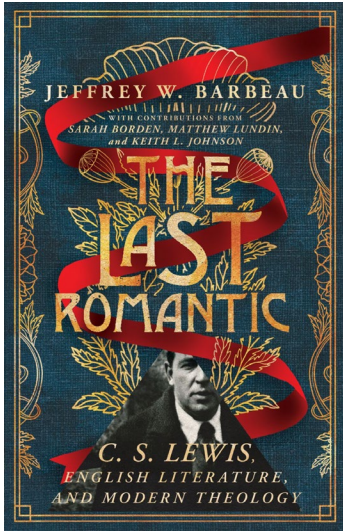
—Adapted from the introduction



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DETAILS



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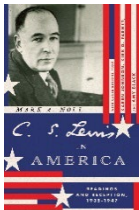
In this theological and literary investigation, Jeffrey Barbeau explores the influence of nineteenth century Romanticism on C. S. Lewis's writing in three essays. Drawing on extensive reading of the marginalia Lewis's personal library, Barbeau offers a fresh understanding of modern theology, Romantic poetry, and Lewis's most beloved works.

The Hansen Lectureship Series

The Hansen Lectureship Series features reflections related to the imaginative work and lasting influence of seven British authors, including C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, and Dorothy L. Sayers. The books in the series are based on the Ken and Jean Hansen Lectureship, an annual lecture series hosted at the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, named in honor of former Wheaton College trustee Ken Hansen and his wife, Jean, and endowed in their memory by Walter and Darlene Hansen. Each book includes three lectures by a Wheaton College faculty member on one or more of the Wade Center authors, with responses by fellow faculty members.

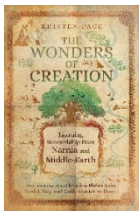
Founded in 1965, the Marion E. Wade Center houses a major research collection of writings and related materials by and about seven British authors: Owen Barfield, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, Dorothy L. Sayers, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. The Wade Center collects, preserves, and makes these resources available to researchers and visitors through its reading room, museum displays, educational programming, and publications. All of these endeavors are a tribute to the importance of the literary, historical, and Christian heritage of these writers.

Titles in the Hansen Lectureship Series include:



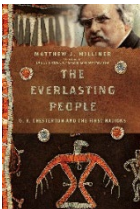
C. S. Lewis in America: Readings and Reception, 1935-1947 by Mark A. Noll
November 14, 2023 | \$20.99, 176 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0700-6

How has the work of C. S. Lewis transformed the American religious landscape? With fresh research and analysis, this volume by noted historian Mark A. Noll considers the surprising reception of Lewis among Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical readers to see how early readings of the Oxford don shaped his later influence.



The Wonders of Creation: Learning Stewardship from Narnia and Middle-Earth by Kristen Page
November 29, 2022 | \$22.99, 144 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0435-7

In this insightful exploration of Narnia and Middle-earth, Biologist Kristen Page discovers what we these beloved fictional landscapes might teach us about our real-life landscapes and how to become better stewards of God's good creation.



The Everlasting People: G. K. Chesterton and the First Nations by Matthew J. Milliner
December 14, 2021 | \$20.99, 184 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0032-8

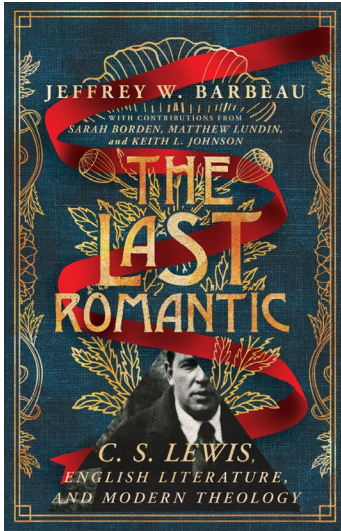
How might the life and work of Christian writer G. K. Chesterton shed light on our understanding of North American Indigenous art and history? In these discerning reflections, art historian Matthew Milliner appeals to Chesterton's life and work in order to understand and appreciate both Indigenous art and the complex, often tragic history of First Nations peoples.



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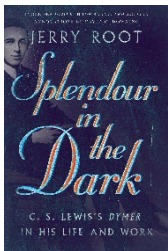


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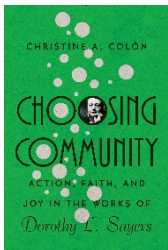
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Splendour in the Dark: C. S. Lewis's Dymer in His Life and Work by Jerry Root

November 3, 2020 | \$20.99, 256 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5375-5

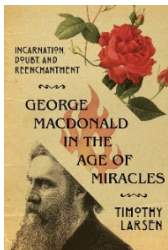
Several years before he converted to Christianity, C. S. Lewis published a narrative poem, *Dymer*, which not only sheds light on the development of his literary skills but also offers a glimpse of his intellectual and spiritual growth. Including the complete annotated text of Lewis's poem, this volume helps us understand both Lewis's change of mind and our own journeys of faith.



Choosing Community: Action, Faith, and Joy in the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers by Christine A. Colón

October 15, 2019 | \$16.99, 152 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5374-8

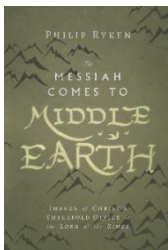
Few writers in the twentieth century were as creative and productive as Dorothy L. Sayers, the English playwright, novelist, and poet. In this volume in the Hansen Lectureship Series, Christine Colón explores the role of community in Sayers's works. In particular, she considers how Sayers offers a vision of communities called to action, faith, and joy, and she reflects on how we also are called to live in community together.



George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles: Incarnation, Doubt, and Reenchantment by Timothy Larsen

November 20, 2018 | \$18.99, 150 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5373-1

Timothy Larsen considers the legacy of George MacDonald, the Victorian Scottish author and minister who is best known for his pioneering fantasy literature. Larsen explores how MacDonald sought to counteract skepticism, unbelief, naturalism, and materialism and to herald instead the reality of the miraculous, the supernatural, the wondrous, and the realm of the spirit.



The Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth: Images of Christ's Threefold Office in The Lord of the Rings by Philip Ryken

November 14, 2017 | \$20.99, 150 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5372-4

Can *The Lord of the Rings* help us understand the Christian faith more deeply? Wheaton College president Philip Ryken mines the riches of Tolkien's theological imagination. In the characters of Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn, Ryken hears echoes of the one who is the true prophet, priest, and king, considering what that threefold office means for the calling of all Christians.



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