

A Brief History of the New York C.S. Lewis Society

In 1968, there were no C.S. Lewis Societies. With the exception of one or two books, there were no published studies of C.S. Lewis. It would be four years before Hooper and Green would publish the first biography. But in September of 1969, Henry Noel in New York City had an idea that would launch the first C.S. Lewis Society.

What led to that idea began in 1950 when Henry lived in France. A lifelong agnostic, he was attending a French school that used Lewis' book *THE PILGRIM'S REGRESS* to teach good English style. When he returned to the States in 1954, he wrote, "I remembered it and became haunted; I had to write Geoffrey Bles (the British publisher) to obtain a copy and I bought *SURPRISED BY JOY* merely because I wanted more English of that quality."

In the early 1960s Henry got the books out and read them again and then started buying all Lewis' books. In 1963 he was baptized. After noticing the frequent references to Lewis in *National Review* magazine, he sent them this announcement which they inserted in the "Notes and Asides" section of the September 23, 1969 issue: "I invite all those living in or near NYC who are longstanding admirers of Lewis' books, or who, for whatever reason, cherish feelings of affection and gratitude toward his memory, to get in touch with me ..."

Henry received over 40 inquiries from that advertisement. On November 1st, fourteen of those responders met on Staten Island and agreed to form the society. A month later they met again and accepted a charter. From the very beginning it was decided to publish a monthly bulletin which would include a report of the meeting as well as other news and essays.

In the February 1970 bulletin it is recorded that Walter Hooper wrote a letter to the society regarding copyright concerns. The Society wrote back to assure him that there would not be any "indiscriminant reproduction of CSL's works." In March, Hooper wrote to say he would be in New York in the summer and, indeed, he first visited the early Society members in the home of Jim and Alejandra Como that year. By May 1970 there were 97 members in 20 states and 3 countries. There were no subscription fees the first year – costs were covered by donation.

Notable early members included Warnie Lewis, Owen Barfield, Walter Hooper, Clyde Kilby, Thomas Howard, Peter Kreeft, and Roger Lancelyn Green. A letter from Green appeared in the December 1970 issue:

“I was very pleased to receive your letter, and most honoured and flattered by your proposal to make me an honorary member of the NYCSL Society. Thank you so much, I accept the honour with delight ... and I hope one day to be able to visit you, perhaps in 1972 when I may be able to come to New York. [...] your notes and reports make me wish I could be present at all your meetings [...] Work on the biography is proceeding very slowly: there is so much material to cover in the way of letters, diaries, etc. for the earlier part of his life --- and so many people who knew him and recall things about him in his later years. Of course, Walter and I can do little more than lay the foundation stone for all the books about Lewis and his works that will be written in years to come: but we must try to supply as firm and comprehensive a foundation as possible.”

The speaker in May 1970 (our 7th meeting) was Jane Douglas whose personal remembrance of Lewis was printed in the Bulletin. Many of you are familiar with the seminal book, C.S. LEWIS AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE, edited by Jim Como and published in 1978. All but two of the essays in that book were by people who knew Lewis personally - - - and a third of the remembrances were first published in the Society Bulletin.

Keep in mind that the publication of the Bulletin was accomplished without the benefits of a computer, internet, or email. The July 1974 issue details how much effort this took:

“Robert Merchant is the person who secures a reporter for each meeting. The report is mailed to him in New Haven, he edits it if necessary and sends it to Jim Como. If there was a paper read at the meeting, this is sent directly to the editor. Letter excerpts are mostly from the files of the corresponding secretary and are sent to the editor from time to time. [...]

When Como has assembled the material, if there is time, he sends it for typing to Elmira, NY to Madge Mattichak, an expert typist [...] When it is returned, Como does the paste-up job and sends the finished sheets to McGovern, who takes them to the printer, later gathers them up, collates and staples the issues and mails them out. [...] The list of subscribers is in New Haven.”

Our first Lewis Weekend conference was held in 1977 with Walter Hooper as our featured speaker. There have been eight weekends in all and speakers have included Jim Como, Ralph McInerny, William Griffin, Joe Christopher, Douglas Gresham, Joseph Pearce, David Downing, Lou Markos, Chris Mitchell and Peter Kreeft.

Kreeft’s talk, C.S. LEWIS AND THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD, was printed in bulletin #175, May 1984 (there are now 450 bulletins), and he began with these words:

“Back in 1967, when I was writing a little forty-eight page booklet on C.S. Lewis for the Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, I wrote them a letter with my completed manuscript saying I had enough file drawers that I could easily expand this little introductory booklet into a full-length book in a few months: would they be interested in looking at such a manuscript? Did they think Lewis was a major enough Christian thinker to justify an original philosophical and theological evaluation of him. Their reply was: No, we think the Lewis craze has peaked. This is the age of the secular city. No one will be reading Lewis ten or twenty years from now, much less books about Lewis.” (#6)

There have been four editors since 1969: Gene McGovern, Jim Como, Jerry Daniels, and I began my tenure as editor 15 years ago this month. The content has been quite consistent through the years, but I changed the bulletin from a monthly to a bi-monthly to allow more time to complete the work and more pages to allow for lengthier essays. It was made clear to me from the beginning that the bulletin is not intended as an academic journal, but its purpose is to be a record of a society’s meetings, including published talks, essays, book reviews, news and letters.

In one issue, a member wrote to suggest that the bulletin be changed into a quarterly publication, like a scholarly journal. As this letter from Charles Huttar published in November 1988 suggests, this was not a popular idea. He wrote, “I second those who hope the Bulletin stays as it is. Part of its real value is its unpretentiousness - - - refreshing monthly evidence that Lewis is important not just to academic professionals like me, but to real people. His stature is already beyond the power of a specialist journal to enhance it.”

Sometimes the letters sent to us are my favorite part. For example, here is a letter from a young girl: (#8)

“Dear C.S. Lewis, I love the books you wrote about Narnia. I know you are no longer alive, but I had to write to people who still believe in you. My teacher, Mrs. Farigno, told us we were going to have a book election and that all of us (everyone in my 6th grade class) would pick an author and give a presentation about his life and work. Then we would all vote. I’m very sorry you didn’t win, but you did win 5th place. I wish very much you had won. I campaigned very hard for you. I love to read your books because they are magical, imaginative, exciting and there is a lot of adventure.”

**Love, - a girl named Anna M. Lang
The Rudolph Steiner School, New York**

Our monthly meeting format has also stood the test of time and remains virtually unchanged from the early years. There is a short reading from Lewis by one of the members, a time for announcements, introductions (when each person states their name and if they are a first-time visitor they are asked to name their first Lewis book or their favorite, or both). Then the speaker is introduced, we listen to the talk or participate in a moderated discussion, and then break at 9pm for refreshments.

We always meet on the second Friday of the month except August when we don’t meet. In July we have a “From the Floor” meeting when people can bring up any topic of interest, and in particular we

solicit criticisms of Lewis' writing or ideas. Believe it or not, we have one member who does not enjoy the Narnia books and it is an ongoing mystery why TIL WE HAVE FACES is the favorite of many and the least favorite of many more. For the past 12 years it has been our tradition to have a radio theater reading of one of Dorothy Sayer's radio plays from THE MAN BORN TO BE KING. It's one of our most popular and well-attended meetings where we sing Christmas carols on West 11th Street before coming inside for the play

The early meetings were held in member's homes. Then for a short while at a Baptist Church, then Madison Ave. Presbyterian Church until June 1972, then six years at the Rudolf Steiner School, a few months at the Salisbury Hotel, and finally, 1980, at The Church of the Ascension in Greenwich Village, where we have met for the past 34 years.

Many people attending the Taylor Conference today have been speakers at our monthly meeting: Charlie Starr, Michael Ward, and Will Vaus. Our meeting schedule is on the new Society website and we love to welcome visitors. Meetings are open to the public and we serve coffee and cake afterwards.

Time does not allow me to mention many other memorable events and speakers. But I wanted to read a portion of a letter sent by Walter Hooper on the occasion of our 25th anniversary.

"I expect most of those who read this will be familiar with the history of the NYCSL Society and that of the Inklings. If you look at the beginnings of the Inklings you find Lewis, Tolkien and the others already in possession of the great imaginative ideas which over the years were developed in the company of one another. What I would call their best thoughts were not arrived at after years of meeting, and they certainly didn't bloom as a result of finding themselves the subject of doctoral dissertations. The best was there at the beginning and it came out over the years because of one another.

I feel sure the same is true of our Society. [...] We've developed, but I'm sure that whatever good we've received is not a result of ingenious theories about Lewis ... This stuff is not the same as enjoying the best that Lewis had to give, and I can think of few things that sadden me more than seeing a young person approaching Lewis through all this detritus, missing thereby those very things which caused the NYCSL Society to be founded, the Inklings to change the world, and CS Lewis groups to keep showing up everywhere. What all these groups have is the capacity to spread around the best God gave Lewis. I urge you my friends, not to exchange it for those things which never brought anyone together in charity [...] and which never lead anyone to enjoy what W.H. Lewis said his brother liked so much - - - "pastime with good company." Thank you for giving me so much of your good company over these many years.

As I read this letter, I realized that Walter has also described my pleasure in participating in the Taylor colloquium over the years. It is wonderful to be in the society of friends you can "look along" with at those things that bring us great delight.

When I submitted my proposal for a talk to Pam, I suggested that I would end with some opinions about what makes for a successful Lewis Society or reading group. First, I would say not to be intimidated or concerned if you or your members do not have literature degrees – neither did some of the Inklings. And, as Walter points out in his letter, this is not the essence of a Lewis Society - - - the

essence is a genuine love of C.S. Lewis. Actually, I suspect the letter from “a girl named Anna M. Lang” captures this feeling more effectively, and certainly more succinctly, than any master’s thesis.

If you want some ideas for starting a Lewis Society of reading group, I recommend Will Vaus’s book SPEAKING OF JACK: A CS LEWIS DISCUSSION GUIDE. But the most important secret for success is to imitate what we are experiencing his weekend - - - a time to enjoy one another’s company and the company of C.S. Lewis and his friends.

Thank you.