## Diana Glyer, The Company They Keep, Review by Suzanne M. Wolfe The C.S. Lewis Chronicle Vol. 5, No. 3, Michaelmas 2009

The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community. Diana Glyer. 288 pp. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2008. ISBN 9780873389914

Diana Glyer says that she wrote *The Company They Keep* in part to combat the romantic notion of the writer as solitary genius. As she argues in her epilogue, writers do not create *ex nihilo*—they live and move and have their being within what T.S. Eliot called a "tradition." Her immediate goal in this volume is to place Lewis, Tolkien and the other Inklings within the web of relationships and influences that shaped their creative work.

Glyer takes issue with a host of biographers and critics of the Inklings—including Humphrey Carpenter—who hold that Lewis, Tolkien, Charles Williams and their companions had little influence on each others' writings. She admits that the Inklings themselves were the source of this myth. She quotes Lewis: "I don't think Tolkien influenced me, and I am certain I didn't influence him" (xvii). Glyer says that her book was born out of "the persistent claims that the Inklings did not influence each other and my sense that they must have" (xviii).

So far, so good. There is something ludicrous about the notion that a group of friends who met weekly to discuss their works in progress did not influence one another to some degree. For example, thanks to Walter Hooper's heroic work in collecting and editing Lewis' papers in the decades after his death, as well as many fine critical biographies of the Inklings, we know that Tolkien's criticism of Lewis' penchant for allegory profoundly influenced his fiction and led to his most imaginatively realized work, *Till We Have Faces*.

In the chapter "Opponents: Issuing Challenge" Glyer deals with Tolkien's opposition to allegory and Lewis' apologetic writings in general but, oddly, fails to pursue the question of how profoundly this influenced Lewis' subsequent thought and fiction. Instead, in a later chapter, she focuses on how Lewis changed *The Lion, the Witch, and The Wardrobe* to include a warning about the dangers of shutting oneself in a wardrobe after Maud Barfield expressed concern that it might pose a danger to young readers (123).

Another example of how Glyer often fails to penetrate to a deeper conclusion comes in the chapter "Editors: Making Changes." There she discusses Tolkien's editing of one of Lewis' drafts of *Out of the Silent Planet*. She quotes David Downing's

comment that Tolkien's editing is "one of the most perceptive brief treatments of Lewis' strengths and weaknesses as a writer" but then concludes, lamely, that "it shows that Tolkien recognized the book's quality and understood Lewis' writing skills" (124).

The Company They Keep is filled with similar self-evident conclusions. In the chapter "Collaborators: Working Together" Glyer says that Lewis "extensively revised" The Problem of Pain after reading it aloud to the Inklings but instead of explaining the stylistic or thematic nature of the changes she concludes: The Problem of Pain "serves as one of the most comprehensive illustrations of the highly interactive process of drafting, commenting, editing, and collaborating described in these pages" (148).

Glyer herself admits that the task of sifting through every reference the Inklings made about each other is inherently difficult or even impossible, so it is puzzling when she makes the following claim:

The overwhelming impression one gets from such examples is that the Inklings have learned a great deal from one another and are thankful. But it goes far beyond details and specifics. They also provided models and paradigms that had broad implications for the way they went about thinking, writing, and teaching. They learned foundational concepts from each other, concepts that shifted the course of their basic beliefs and led to fresh insights in their fields (190).

Coming as it does near the end of the book, this statement only serves to highlight its shortcomings rather than fulfil its promise. What is lacking is precisely a sense of the "models and paradigms" that affected the Inklings' "thinking, writing, and teaching." Glyer gives us invaluable "details and specifics" but only hints at how they impacted the intellectual and spiritual development of the Inklings. Grateful though I am for Glyer's research (the appendix and the index are valuable resources for Inklings' scholars), I found myself growing increasingly frustrated by her inability or unwillingness to draw substantial critical conclusions from this work. Thus it did not surprise me when, in the last chapter of the book, Glyer concludes: "When individuals work together, they shape each other's work in various ways" (214).

The Company They Keep gives us a glimpse into the personal friendships between the Inklings but little real sense of the extraordinary intellectual dynamism of the group and how it substantially influenced their work. The sheer abundance of material written about the Inklings since Lewis and Tolkien's deaths may have something to do with this tendency towards a hagiographical dilution of the

Inklings' literary legacy rather than a more strenuous critical approach. Whatever the case, this book breaks little new ground in Inkling scholarship.

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