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FEATURES, LEARNING

from the March 23, 1999 edition

[**Editor's note:** *The Christian Science Monitor archive includes stories dating back to 1980. Some early articles lack sufficient formatting, and will appear as one long column without paragraph breaks. We apologize for the aesthetics and hope that the information will still be of value to you.*]

A touch of Narnia in Illinois

Jay Copp, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

WHEATON, ILL. - Children visiting the Marion E. Wade Center rush to the dark, massive wardrobe just inside the entrance. They beam at it rapturously or carefully open its doors, half-expecting to catch a glimpse of Narnia, the magical kingdom created by author C.S. Lewis.

You'd expect to find Lewis's childhood wardrobe - the one he played in with his brother that inspired the book "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" - somewhere near Headington, England, where he lived. Instead, the best place to go to learn more about the British author is right in the middle of America's heartland.

Wheaton College, in Illinois, is home to the Wade Center, which houses the world's largest collection of what Lewis read and wrote.

Scholars come here to pore over the 2,300 letters penned by Lewis, adults marvel at the 2,400 books from Lewis's personal library, and children giggle at precious childhood photos of a young, knickered Lewis on a bike or trekking to the woods with his brother.

Even 100 years after his birth, Clive Staples Lewis continues to be wildly popular, with his "Chronicles of Narnia" books and "Mere Christianity," a Christian apologetics work, selling robustly. Though the Chronicles have never been out of print, a new edition in 1996 sold more than 1 million copies.

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"Can Lewis speak to a post-modern era?" asks Christopher Mitchell, a Lewis scholar and the director of the center. "He can and he does. He's shown he has staying power: It's been nearly 40 years since he died.

"He's just good fun to read. He writes so well. He's not obscure. If you come to him with a fuzzy idea [about Christianity], he'll clear it up."

Perry Bramlett, a Baptist minister and author of two books on Lewis, agrees.

"C.S. Lewis is a household name all over the world and is easily the century's most trusted and read Christian writer," he says. "His use of humor, reason, and imagination, combined with an authentic piety, insures that he will always be read, studied, discussed, and enjoyed."

The centenary of Lewis's birth last November fueled the growth of Lewis societies and Internet Web sites, and spurred a host of conferences in Ireland, where he was born, and in England, where he was an Oxford don. But Wheaton's connection began much earlier.

A Christian liberal-arts school 25 miles from Chicago, Wheaton is best known locally for its association with the evangelist Billy Graham. A short walk from the Billy Graham Center is the second floor of the Buswell Library and its Wade Center.

The center grew out of the personal Lewis collection of the late Clyde Kilby, an English literature professor at Wheaton. Mr. Kilby was one of the first professors anywhere to teach a course on Lewis. He met the author once in 1953, corresponded with him, and eventually befriended his brother, Warren, who willed Wheaton College his brother's memorabilia. The college acquired other material at an auction and from a British college.

Family and associates of Marion Wade, a Christian businessman, created the center in 1974. A recent donation from Mr. Wade's daughter, Mary, will allow the center to break ground soon for its own facility on campus.

"The center gives the college a profile that would be difficult to obtain otherwise," says Mr. Mitchell. "We're viewed as a Protestant evangelical institution. But I end up speaking in places and environments that most faculty never find themselves." In December, for example, he traveled to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, to give a lecture on Lewis.

More than 5,000 visitors wandered through the pleasant, library-like center last year. An equally large number came through in 1994 after the release of "Shadowlands," a movie starring Anthony Hopkins as Lewis and Debra Winger as Joy Davidman Gresham, the American-born writer who married Lewis in 1956. Ms. Winger spent a day at the center researching Lewis's life before filming began.

On hand at the center are Lewis's personal library and letters, nearly 900 books about him, the family diary and photos, four

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bulging cabinets of journal, magazine, and newspaper stories on Lewis, and 50 video and audio tapes of family, friends, and colleagues. Also on view are piquant Lewis memorabilia: his writing desk, fountain pen, tea mug, and a ration card.

But the big draw is the wardrobe. Seven feet high and four feet across, it contains period-piece fur coats. A plaque playfully warns: "Enter at your own risk. The Wade Center assumes no responsibility for persons who disappear or who are lost in this wardrobe."

The sign is a clever play on the famous scene from "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," a 1950 book where four children walk through a wardrobe stuffed with fur coats into an enchanted world of talking animals, centaurs, and Father Christmas.

On a wall opposite the entrance, the wardrobe is the first item that catches the eyes of visitors.

"Children like to touch it and go 'ooh' and 'ah,'" says Tony Dawson, a volunteer on staff.

Lewis and Warren played in the wardrobe as children, making up stories about it. The "Boxen manuscript," a story they wrote and illustrated when young, is on display at the center.

Those who knew Lewis well say all the attention would have made him shudder.

"I don't think Jack [as Lewis was known to friends] would want to be remembered as anyone who did anything other than call remembrance to Jesus Christ," Douglas Gresham, his stepson, has said.

Lewis passed on with little fanfare the same day in 1963 that President Kennedy was assassinated. But Lewis's newsworthiness has soared in recent years. His books have sold an estimated 100 million copies. New collections of his letters will continue to be published. Lewis's close friend and fellow scholar J.R.R. Tolkien once joked that "He'll be the only author who published more books after he died."

The center contains the books and papers of seven British authors: Lewis, Tolkien, Owen Barfield, G.K. Chesterton, George MacDonald, Dorothy Sayers, and Charles Williams. All wrote on religious themes. Lewis, Barfield, Tolkien, and Williams were such fast friends that collectively they were known as the Inklings. Sayers was a contemporary, and the 19th-century writings of McDonald and Chesterton influenced Lewis and his peers.

Still, Lewis is a strong, ineffable presence at the Wade Center. Lining the walls of the outer room are glass-and-wood bookshelves that hold Lewis's own collection.

Among the volumes, besides expected works by Shakespeare, Dickens, and other British stalwarts, are American classics such as "Babbitt," "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," "The Collected Poems of Robert Frost" and, strangely, "Please Don't Eat the Daisies."



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Lewis - who routinely wrote in longhand - penned more than 50 books. The center has 1,065 copies of them, including various editions and translations.

Lewis's popularity crossed borders and cultures: the center has his books in Chinese, Russian, Hebrew, and dozens of other languages. A brilliant scholar, Lewis could read rapidly in Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and German. His commentary on Milton is still considered standard.

In preparation for writing "English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama," he read every book written in English in that century and every book translated into English. (His erudition did not diminish his puckish sense of humor. The English literature book was subtitled "the Oxford History of English Literature," and Lewis, in a nod to the acronym, called it his "oh hell" book.)

In the 1950s until his death, Lewis was besieged by letters from readers, who often felt a personal bond with him. He received as many as 2,000 letters during the Christmas season alone. Though busy with teaching and writing, Lewis made a point to respond to each letter, usually reserving two hours daily for correspondence.

"It was difficult for him. He was such a private person," says Marjorie Mead, the center's associate director. "He believed that if people were interested enough to write, he ought to make an effort."

The center has the Lewis letters in chronological order alphabetized according to recipient. Lewis's letters to readers often patiently answer a question about Christian belief or set straight a matter in the Narnia chronicles. Lewis's religious faith shines through. So, too, does the sense that he saw himself not as a towering literary figure but as a fellow pilgrim, quick to show kindness.

To a man from Allentown, Pa., who commented on a passage from one of his books, Lewis was typically gracious: "What it is to have a real reader!"

30



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