

War Service

CHAPTER ONE

Those of us who have not lived through the horrors of warfare can hardly imagine the prolonged fears, anger, sufferings, sorrows, and uncertainties that many English people endured during the bleakest years of World War II. Americans might think of the shock and outrage that they experienced in reaction to the 9/11 attacks and then consider the appalling number of times such feelings would have to be multiplied even to begin to compare them to those experienced due to the traumas of the Blitz on London and other cities. Between September 1940 and May 1941, the German Luftwaffe poured bombs on London seventy-one times, killing over twenty thousand citizens and seriously injuring tens of thousands more. At one point the relentless pounding went on fifty-seven nights in a row. Casualties often numbered over a thousand on the worst nights in London. Devastating attacks struck fifteen other British industrial cities, leaving some, most memorably Coventry, in almost total ruin. Nearly twenty thousand civilians perished in these

outlying areas, and vastly many more suffered overwhelming personal losses. People spent their nights in excruciating terror agonizing about their own safety or the fate of their children and loved ones. And throughout the British Isles, countless numbers woke up each morning trying to suppress the dread that that might the day when there would be a knock at the door to deliver the message that their beloved son, grandson, or husband would never come home again.

Distressing personal anxieties were magnified in these early years by the real danger of invasion and defeat. Hitler had already exhibited many of his demonic qualities. The British leadership expected an invasion, and indeed he was planning one. A German victory would mean the end of free British civilization as it had been known in the island kingdom. During the six weeks after Hitler's armies suddenly swept through Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg in May 1940, the unthinkable happened. Until this point this new war with Germany had seemed like a continuation of the first Great War. As C. S. Lewis wrote to his lifelong friend Arthur Greeves, one had a "ghostly feeling that it has all happened before—that one fell asleep during the last war and had a delightful dream and has now waked up again."¹ A similar sense that this second war would be a continuation of the first was also present among the high command. Winston Churchill relates in his memoirs that in 1940 it was natural to regard the French, who had endured the brunt of "the terrible land fighting of 1914–1918,"

as having the “primacy in the military art.”² The unthinkable was that this mighty French army with its British allies, which so recently had stood strong for four years, could now be completely routed in a few weeks. The British army escaped the Germans in late May and early June only through the amazingly improvised rescue from Dunkirk. In a memorable speech, Prime Minister Churchill promised, “We shall fight” from the beaches to the hills if necessary, but would never surrender. The speech was so powerful because the possibility was so real.³

For most of the next year, the British people struggled to cope with a combination of the immediate terrors of blitz bombing, the loss of loved ones, the dread of losing others, and fears of a German invasion. Shortages, rationing, blackouts, Home Guard patrols, and displaced people were constant reminders of extreme and dangerous times. Many British people were undergoing in the space of months a range of intensity of experiences that normally might take a lifetime to unfold.

Oxford was considered relatively safe from the bombings, but the early part of the war was nonetheless grim. C. S. Lewis, according to his friend and physician, Dr. Robert Havard, was greatly disheartened by the outbreak of the war. In addition to experiencing the distresses shared with most people, Lewis was pained to think that he had for so many years prepared himself to write and now, just when he was coming into his own, the war might limit his freedom to do that. During the dark days of July 1940, Lewis closed a

letter to a friend with “Well: we are on the very brink of the abyss now. Perhaps we shan’t be meeting again in this world. In case we don’t, good bye and God bless you.” He added a postscript that he realized he was being melodramatic.⁴ Havard, who was also one of the Inklings, reports that after the fall of France they spent a depressing evening speculating on which of their writings the Nazis might find offensive if there were an occupation. Lewis recalled that in *The Pilgrim’s Regress* he had depicted dwarfs of “a black kind with shirts,” though most his writings were not political enough to be attacked.⁵

Lewis’s own bit of military service came from joining the Home Guard, made up of men not involved in the regular service who would be prepared to help resist a possible German invasion. His duties involved patrolling the streets of Oxford all night once a week. Sometimes he found the nighttime walks beautiful, and he enjoyed talking to men from ordinary ranks of society. He reported one working man remarking (in an analogy to sports matches) about the expected invasion, “Well, it looks as if we are for the Final and that it will be on the home ground.”⁶ He also sometimes got to try out his apologetic arguments on (literally) the man on the street. He reported in October 1940 that he had “succeeded in making my . . . fellow sentry realize for the first time in his life that ‘nature’ can’t have ‘purposes’ unless it is a rational substance, and if it is you’d better call it God, or the gods, or a god, or the devil.”⁷

England was still suffering when, on February 7, 1941, the Reverend J. W. Welch, director of the Religious Broadcasting Department of the BBC, wrote what would prove to be a momentous letter to C. S. Lewis. While immediate invasion seemed less likely, the devastating bombing was continuing. By that time, the imposing BBC building, Broadcasting House, in the heart of London, had been hit by bombs on two occasions, once when they could be heard during a broadcast. It was from the roof of that building that Edward R. Murrow made his famous eyewitness reports describing the Blitz to American audiences. Welch was situated in Bristol, where he also had a narrow escape as bombs were falling during a Sunday-evening religious broadcast. Welch had never met C. S. Lewis, but he had been greatly impressed by the Oxford don's recent and timely apologetic work, *The Problem of Pain*. He thanked Lewis for that book and asked him if he might be willing to help with religious broadcasting. "The microphone," Welch explained, "is a limiting and often irritating instrument, but the quality of thinking and the depth of conviction which I find in your book ought surely to be shared with a great many other people; and for any talk we can be sure of a fairly intelligent audience of more than a million."⁸

That what turned out to be such a fruitful proposal should come from an official of the BBC calls for some explanation and background. The British Broadcasting Corporation was a noncommercial company serving

the British public under a royal charter. The company had an explicitly Christian dimension. Broadcasting House, completed in 1931, was inscribed with a dedication to “the almighty God” and with a prayer that its work might promote whatever might lead hearers to “tread the path of wisdom and righteousness.”⁹ Those sentiments reflected the outlook of the BBC’s founding director general, Sir John Reith, a deeply religious Scotsman who presided until 1938. Reith was determined that the new medium should be used not just for entertainment but for edifying public service. Under Reith’s leadership the BBC broadcast daily religious services, meditations, and music during the week and included church services and other Christian programming on Sundays. In deference to the nation’s formal Christian heritage, secular programming on Sundays had to be tasteful, excluding jazz or frivolous comedy or variety shows.¹⁰

The war brought some changes to such policies. For the sake of the troops, the BBC began broadcasting variety shows (not live, only repeats), dance music, and sports in its Forces Programme on Sundays, which anyone could tune to. The war also forced the BBC to limit its domestic broadcasting to a single frequency, so it was virtually the voice of the nation. For James Welch the problem was how to make religious broadcasting both suitable and competitive in this new and trying situation. In April 1940 he personally visited the troops in France, where he confirmed what he and other Christian leaders were all too aware of already:

that there was a huge gap between Great Britain's formal public recognition of Christianity and its actual practice among the British people. Welch estimated that two-thirds of BBC listeners lived without any reference to God. One survey of British army recruits revealed that only 23 percent knew the meaning of Easter.¹¹ In that setting, conventional religious broadcasts were not going to touch most listeners. Radios had to warm up, and during the war many people kept their radios dialed in at low volume in order to hear news bulletins or alerts. The challenge was to get them to turn the volume up. One format that was working in other departments of the BBC was that of the informative talk. Experts might talk on gardening or how to prepare meals under the restrictions of food rationing. Welch had already tried such formats for religious broadcasts. He also recognized the advantage in a speaker who was a layperson and not professionally religious.

The war made it extraordinarily difficult to strike the right balance in religious broadcasting. Welch was very eager to serve the war effort, but like other BBC officials, he was determined to retain the agency's independence and not let themselves be pawns used for state propaganda. Such freedom, they maintained, was one of the central differences between Great Britain and totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany or the U.S.S.R. Yet, at the same time, they had to adhere to some wartime restrictions and also take into account the extenuating circumstances of all-out war for

survival. So, for instance, after the fall of France, when invasion seemed imminent, the BBC governors banned pacifists from speaking on any subject. Welch protested strongly and repeatedly and even considered resigning over the issue. Although he was not a pacifist himself, he believed that hearing from them would help remind people that war involved moral choices.¹²

The war also accentuated the ongoing problem of who should be represented in religious broadcasting. The general policy was not to include extremists. So the BBC did not offer broadcasting time to representatives of fundamentalist or other nonmainstream sects. And atheists on the left often protested against the explicitly Christian outlook of the programming. Even so, it was an extraordinary challenge to represent all the major nonextreme religious viewpoints on a single national network. Welch himself was an Anglican. In England somewhat over half the population was Anglican by formal baptism, but the great majority of those were only nominally churched. The free churches, such as the Methodist or Baptist churches, accounted for perhaps another 15 percent. Roman Catholics counted only for about 7 percent, but they, like free church members, were more likely to be active.¹³ The challenge was to create interest among these groups without controversy. That was becoming increasingly difficult during the war. For instance, William Temple, bishop of York (who became archbishop of Canterbury in 1942), was a friend of Welch and a regular speaker on the BBC. But Temple's progressive

social views (published in 1942 in his very popular *Christianity and the Social Order*) brought an outcry from conservatives that religion was being used for partisan political purposes. By mid-1941 the BBC had arrived at a policy that religious speakers should not pontificate on the specifics of economic and political matters on which they had no real expertise. And speakers with competence should state on the air that they were speaking as experts and acknowledge when their views were controversial.¹⁴

In such a setting, C. S. Lewis must have seemed like a godsend. Lewis was a literary scholar with no discernible political interests. The fact was that he rarely even listened to the radio or closely followed the news.¹⁵ Yet, as the author of a space-travel fantasy as well as the generalist's account *The Problem of Pain*, he apparently had an interest in reaching wider audiences. Welch's first suggestion was "You might speak about the Christian, or lack of Christian, assumptions underlying modern literature" and then move "from description and analysis to something more positive and helpful." That was a thoroughly safe proposal that might draw on Lewis's expertise as a professor of literature. Welch's second suggestion, related to what was the genesis of *Mere Christianity*, was that Lewis offer "series of talks on something like 'The Christian Faith As I see It—by a Layman': I am sure there is a need of a positive restatement of Christian doctrine in lay language."¹⁶

Lewis responded on February 10 to say that he would like to do some broadcasts. "Modern literature,"

he said, “would not suit me.” Rather, he already had worked out a definite idea of where to begin a layperson’s presentation of the basics of Christianity:

I think what I mainly want to talk about is the Law of Nature, or objective right and wrong. It seems to me that the N. T., by preaching repentance and forgiveness, always *assumes* an audience who already believe in the law of Nature and know they have disobeyed it. In modern England, we cannot at present assume this, and therefore most apologetic begins a stage too far on. The first step is to create, or recover, the sense of guilt. Hence if I give a series of talks I should mention Christianity only at the end, and would prefer not to unmask my battery till then. Some title like “The Art of being Shocked” or “These Humans” would suit me.¹⁷

Lewis was acutely aware that Great Britain was a Christian country in name only. That disparity was all the more troubling because the war had brought with it a good bit of talk about fighting for “Christian civilization.” Yet there was little clarity, let alone agreement, on what that might mean.¹⁸ Christianity was invoked on ceremonial occasions, and there was some token Christian teaching and observance in the schools. Christianity still had some public privilege, as the BBC broadcasts themselves illustrated. Yet at every level of society, and especially among the intellectuals and the working classes, the most common assumption was that traditional Christianity was out of date

and unscientific. The left-wing writer George Orwell captured the spirit of the times when he wrote in 1940, “We have got to be children of God, even though the God of the Prayer-book no longer exists.”¹⁹

In February 1941, Lewis was at a moment when a request to venture into popular broadcasting fit remarkably well with what else he was doing. The war and the draft had reduced the student population at Oxford and thus relieved him of some of the task of tutoring, which was his principal duty as a don. He was still immensely busy, but that was largely because he was constantly taking on new assignments in addition to his voluminous reading and other academic work. He also was on the lookout for edifying nonacademic projects. The latest had come as an inspiration during the darkest part of the war, when evil was in the air and German invasion seemed imminent. While sitting in church in July 1940, Lewis conceived the idea of a series of letters, originally to be titled *As One Devil to Another*, which would be from a senior devil to a novice. As in *Out of the Silent Planet*, he would try to provide fresh insight on the human condition by viewing it from an unexpected perspective. The subject would be an individual’s Christian faith, and the book would draw on Lewis’s own struggles during his conversion experience. The novice devil would be trying to thwart the incipient faith of a “patient” to whom he had been assigned but would often be botching the job, much to the chagrin of his mentor. Lewis found it easy to write what became *The Screwtape Letters* and probably had

the book finished by the end of 1940.²⁰ The letters were published in thirty-one weekly installments in an Anglican magazine, *The Guardian*, between May and November 1941.

Once James Welch received Lewis's positive response to his inquiry, he turned the arrangements for the radio talks over to his colleague the Reverend Eric Fenn, the BBC's assistant head of religious broadcasting. Fenn, a Presbyterian, had refused military service as a pacifist during World War I. He was knowledgeable as a theologian, and he later taught Christian doctrine at a theological college.²¹ Fenn suggested a series of four live broadcasts in August and met with Lewis in Oxford to discuss them.

Coincidentally, Lewis had recently been enlisted by the secret Military Intelligence to record a talk to be broadcast in Iceland on the cultural affinities between Britain and Iceland evidenced in Norse literature. Iceland was an important staging ground for the British forces whose continued presence there depended on the good will of the Icelandic people. Lewis seems to have kept quiet about his work with Military Intelligence but he apparently alluded to the recording it in a letter to Arthur Greeves in which he said he had recently heard a recording of himself, and "I was unprepared for the total unfamiliarity of the voice."²² Lewis was a most popular lecturer at Oxford, and his radio voice was remarkably effective, with clearly an educated accent but enough of the touch of his Irish origins not to sound stuffy.

During the months prior to the August broadcasts Lewis took on another project that allowed him to serve the war effort directly in his new role as Christian apologist and evangelist and also to hone his skills in communicating with general audiences. Not long after the BBC request, the chaplain-in-chief of the Royal Air Force (RAF) asked Lewis if he would serve as a traveling lecturer to RAF units. Though Lewis did not like to travel, especially in wartime conditions, often on freezing and unlit trains, he saw the opportunity as a duty and readily accepted.

During the Battle of Britain of 1940 and 1941, the RAF was *the* linchpin to defense of the British Isles and Britain's counterattack against Germany. "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few," Prime Minister Churchill famously remarked to the House of Commons in August 1940. The RAF attracted some of the nation's best and brightest, but its ranks included many ordinary young men eager to serve their country. Among those who were on flying crews, the mortality rate was appalling. Stuart Barton Babbage, a chaplain who hosted Lewis one weekend in 1941, recounts that at his base at Norfolk, "the grim fact was that, on the average, a man only completed thirteen raids before being killed or posted missing." The chances of surviving the prescribed service of two tours of thirty sorties each were minimal. As a chaplain, Babbage often met with frightened young men in the prime of life who "desperately wanted to live and to know what it is to love and be loved."²³

In May 1941 Lewis wrote to his friend Sister Penelope, an Anglican nun, “I’ve given some talks to the R. A. F. at Abingdon already and as far as I can judge they were a complete failure.” The job was one of those “one dare neither refuse nor perform.” He took comfort in the Old Testament story that God had used an ass to convert the prophet Balaam. At the bottom of the letter he sketched a picture of a donkey wearing a mortarboard next to a nun outside a stable in the radiance of the heavenly city.²⁴ Lewis soon encountered some greater successes, and throughout the war he continued his arduous “missionary journeys” (as he put it to Dorothy Sayers)²⁵ to RAF bases. In 1941, having spent all of his summer vacation going on two- or three-day trips to RAF bases, he wrote, “I had never realized how tiring perpetual traveling is (specially on crowded trains),”²⁶ Chaplain Babbage thought that he was effective, even if the circumstances were trying. At Norfolk Lewis had to speak in the open air to Sunday-morning “parade services” that Lewis thought, by being required, were designed to “harden men in impenitence.”²⁷ Voluntary evening meetings had the drawback that men faced peer pressure against leaving the barracks for a religious meeting. Nonetheless, the RAF talks helped the radio talks by giving Lewis valuable experience and feedback from addressing people from many ranks of society.

Lewis later reflected on lessons he learned from these encounters. For instance, he learned that materialism was not the only major competitor to Christian faith. Many English people were open to alternative

religious outlooks such as Theosophy, Spiritualism, or British Israelitism. Furthermore, working-class people tended to be entirely skeptical about the relevance of anything historical, and often they had heard in a general way that textual criticism had cast doubt on Scripture. Lewis also learned not only not to use hard words but also that some ordinary words differ in meaning to the uneducated and the educated. For instance, “*creature* means not creature but ‘animal.’” Or “*Morality*, nearly always means ‘chastity.’” He thought the educated speaker simply needs to learn the popular English language, “just as a missionary learns Bantu before preaching to the Bantus.” So the evangelist or apologist needs to be first a translator. Beyond that, he said, “the greatest barrier I have met is the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin.”²⁸

Addressing a general radio audience had its own challenges. Lewis had to imagine the immense range of varieties of people who might be listening in and then think of ways to engage and hold their attention. Imagination was, of course, one of Lewis’s strong suits. Despite being an Oxford don, he seems from the beginning to have been good at picturing all the varieties of people who might be tuned in and what it would take to communicate to such diverse audiences. What might they have in common? Most would not be much interested in hearing about Christianity, especially not initially. In his May 1941 letter to Sister Penelope, Lewis provided an additional encapsulation of his earliest conception of his first series of radio talks.

Sister Penelope was an accomplished writer herself and had become something of a spiritual confidante of Lewis after she had written to him in appreciation of *Out of the Silent Planet*. Apparently she was working on some talks as well, and he thought they should get together to compare notes. “Mine,” Lewis explained, “are *praeparatio evangelica*, rather than *evangelium*, and attempt to convince people that there is a moral law, that we disobey it, and that the existence of a Law-giver is at least very probable and also (*unless* you add the Christian doctrine of the Atonement) imparts despair rather than comfort.”²⁹ In his view, the lack of a sense of sin was the number-one barrier. But even in post-Christian Great Britain, people had some common moral sensibilities.

The talks had to be prepared well in advance for approval by Eric Fenn and then to be cleared by the censor. There was no room for ad lib. They also had to be an exact length to fit the time slot. The German propagandist Lord Haw-Haw, broadcasting on the same wavelength, could fill any unexpected silences in a broadcast. Wartime sensibilities could be delicate. For instance, someone at the BBC criticized an early title for the series, “Inside Information,” as “rather unseemly.”³⁰ Lewis would have to take the train to London to do the live broadcasts. When he accepted the assignment, England was still in the midst of the Blitz, so he had also accepted that danger as a matter of course. By August, to his great relief, the nightly bombing had stopped.