



Friends of the Wade

The Marion E. Wade Center Wheaton College

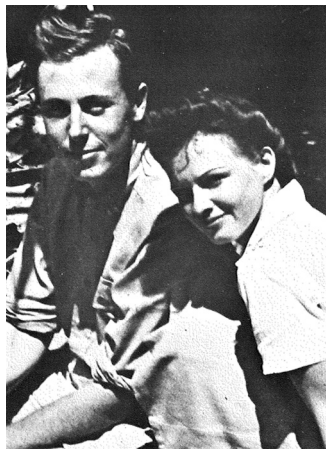
Sheldon Vanauken's Encounter With Light

Born in 1914, writer Sheldon Vanauken—best known for *A Severe Mercy*, his autobiographical account of love and conversion—met C.S. Lewis in Oxford in the 1950s. Lewis influenced the faith journey of Vanauken and his wife, “Davy,” through a friendship and correspondence that Vanauken chronicles in his writings. Because of Vanauken’s connection to Lewis, today the Wade Center houses the Vanauken archive, including typescripts and proofs of Vanauken’s books *A Severe Mercy*, *Gateway to Heaven*, and *Under the Mercy*; photocopies of articles; reviews; and a Bible and drawings belonging to Davy. The archive was begun in 1980, after Vanauken visited the Wade Center, with Vanauken personally donating materials until his death in October, 1996.

Much of Vanauken’s story of becoming a Christian, in part through the impact of the writings of various Wade authors, is told in his publication, *Encounter With Light*. That little booklet, published by Wheaton College in 1960, was the seed from which *A Severe Mercy* grew. Its contents were originally published in *His* magazine, and the Wade Center’s founder, Dr. Clyde Kilby, later had this article reprinted as the booklet that is still available for sale at the Wade Center today. Dr. Kilby was also instrumental in the

original publication of *A Severe Mercy* by Harper & Row in 1977.

In this newsletter we offer you the following excerpt from *Encounter With Light* and a glimpse at how C.S. Lewis and the writings of other Wade authors impacted the life of this seeker.



Sheldon and Davy Vanauken.
Photo from *A Severe Mercy* by
Sheldon Vanauken. San Francisco:
Harper and Row, 1980.

“The beginning of conversion was, I suppose, the moment that I abandoned my childhood Christianity and became a small, fierce atheist. ... The necessity of this process is explained by the aphorism: ‘To believe with certainty, one must begin by doubting.’ By doubting, and by abandoning a seemingly inadequate Christianity that I had never, so to speak, believed on my own, I had taken a first step towards real belief.

... [While a student at Oxford University], one evening, as I walked back across the meadows ... hearing the singing of the bells and seeing the tremendous, soaring uprush of the spire of St. Mary the Virgin in the dusk, I thought (or Someone at my elbow murmured) that now, perhaps, was the time for [a] second look [at Christianity]. I did not resist.

“Be busy
learning to
pray.”

— C.S. Lewis in
a letter to Sheldon
Vanauken soon
after Vanauken’s
conversion



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This time last year I was asked to teach a course on Tolkien, Literature, and Theology at Wheaton College. Interestingly, only then did I realize that while I had given many talks on Tolkien over the past 17 years, I had never taught a course on the man or his work. This surprised me, since of the Wade authors, Tolkien has been with me the longest. My introduction to Middle-earth came in the summer of 1967, during high school, when a friend gave me Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Though I did not realize the significance of this encounter with Tolkien at the time, I knew Middle-earth had opened up new imaginative spaces within my heart and mind. The prospect of teaching a course on the theological significance of Tolkien's work delighted me. I came away from this course with a renewed appreciation for Tolkien's insight into certain themes central to the Christian faith, especially his concept of *eucatastrophe*, which literarily is that sudden, unlooked for turn of events that transforms tragedy into something that can be celebrated. The potency of this literary turn comes, Tolkien believed, from the fact that the central event of the real world is "the most complete conceivable eucatastrophe": the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

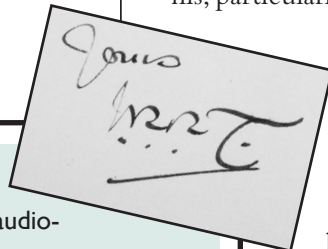
I offer Tolkien's rich concept of *eucatastrophe* as a reflection of the compelling power of tragedy turned to triumph in the Easter story.

WITH ALL GOOD WISHES,



Did You Know?

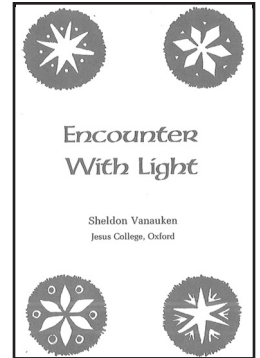
Wade museum visitors can now view clips from a 1968 BBC documentary, "Tolkien in Oxford," on our audio-visual kiosk. The footage captures one of Tolkien's few appearances on video. In the first clip, Tolkien explains the surprising origin of *The Hobbit*. The second clip explores the author's love of languages and features him writing and reading in Elvish. This new feature routinely delights visitors as they watch a literary hero discuss his life's work. We invite you to come by the museum and enjoy a bit of Tolkien on film! The entire documentary is also available for any who are interested in viewing the full program. **W**



Vanauken's Encounter With Light

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

... There were half a hundred books that autumn and winter. I became interested right at the start and neglected all else, though at first it was only an interesting *study*, not something that might turn out to be true and compel my life into other courses. By good fortune the first thing I read was a science-fiction trilogy by an Oxford don, C. S. Lewis. This had the effect of showing me that the Christian God might, quite reasonably, be big enough, after all, ... to include the stars and the spiral nebulae. G. K. Chesterton, with wit and no pompousness, presented a brilliant, reasoned case for Christianity. Charles Williams, theologian and novelist, opened up realms of the spirit I hadn't known existed and suggested that God's view of history might be very different to man's—and quite as possible. ... Dorothy Sayers preached the crusade, attacked complacency and dullness like a scorpion, and made Christianity dramatic and exciting. ... Above all, there was C. S. Lewis; he had been an atheist and was now a Christian, and he could talk the language of the skeptic—my language. His was perhaps the most brilliant and certainly the most lucid mind I had ever encountered. ... I read every book of his, particularly *The Great Divorce*, *The Problem of Pain*,



Miracles, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Pilgrim's Regress*, and *Surprised by Joy*.

... Finally I decided to write to C. S. Lewis. [Lewis's response, on 14 December 1950, began:] "My own position at the threshold of Xtianity was exactly the opposite of yours. You wish it were true; I strongly hoped it was *not*."

If you would like to read more of Vanauken's story, including three thoughtful letters by Lewis, *Encounter With Light* is available for purchase from the Wade Center for \$1.50 plus postage. **W**

Up Close

Steering Committee: Marilee Melvin

Marilee Melvin has been a member of the Wade Center Steering Committee since 1990, but her association with the Wade and with Clyde and Martha Kilby goes back many years before that. Marilee's mother studied literature under Dr. Kilby in the early 1940s, and Marilee herself took his classes in Romantic Literature and Modern Mythology three decades later. Like so many of Dr. Kilby's students, she was a frequent guest in the Kilby home. Even after Marilee's graduation from Wheaton College, Dr. Kilby continued to be an encouraging mentor and friend until his death in 1986. Marilee was instrumental in bringing Martha Kilby to the Wade Center in 1991 for the dedication of the Reading Room in the Kilbys' honor, and she often visited Mrs. Kilby in Columbus, Mississippi.

Marilee has worked for nearly twenty-five years at Wheaton College as a senior administrator, first in Alumni Relations and more recently in the President's Office. Her early career, however, was spent in Washington, D.C., in various jobs including a non-political secretarial post in the Carter White House and a subsequent political assignment in the Reagan White House, where she worked in the West Wing until she moved with her boss, Attorney General Edwin Meese III, to the Justice Department. Marilee observes, "In each of these unpredictable professional developments, with all of the attendant interesting relationships, my personal intellectual foundation in the Wade Center authors has been a great boon."

As with many other readers, Marilee's exposures to C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* and his Space Trilogy were formative, but she recounts that "possibly the one book that influenced me most was George MacDonald's *The Princess and Curdie*. Lessons learned by both the Princess Irene and her miner Curdie have stayed with me for a lifetime as my own lessons."



A gathering with the Kilbys at the Melvin home in Oak Brook, IL, 1976. L-R: Deborah Melvin Beisner, Marian Bulander Melvin, Marilee Melvin, Barbara Smith, Martha Kilby, and Clyde Kilby.



Clyde Kilby and Marilee Melvin, 1976.

As Marilee sees the role of the Wade Center, "people are longing for meaning in their lives, to see their lives as being part of a meaningful whole, reflective of a coherent world view. ... Just being involved with the Wade Center and systematically studying its authors can enrich and strengthen one's intellectual, spiritual, and creative life in many ways. I believe the Center can be a source of great refreshment and renewal for the church, inviting the world to join in the 'great conversation' that went on between the authors as they interacted with each other and with intellectual history."

During Marilee's tenure on the Wade Steering Committee she has contributed much to the Wade Center, in part through her strong connection to the legacy of the Kilbys, and we are deeply grateful for her partnership with us. **W**

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Highlights

The Wade Center's cataloger, Nicole Long, has been working since last August to create library records of materials in the Wade collection. Her efforts will enable researchers to search the collection online, from both the Wade Center and off-site locations. Nicole and the archival staff periodically evaluate the progress of this process, adjusting strategies to yield better results more efficiently. For example, to increase the rate at which critical materials are processed, Nicole trained Wade archivists Heidi Truty and Laura Schmidt in basic cataloging. Now Heidi and Laura are able to participate in cataloging the general book collection and the back issue periodical collection. This has allowed Nicole to complete our current periodical subscription collection and begin cataloging books from Lewis's personal library.

This important work is only possible because of the cataloging project funds

raised by our Friends of the Wade in 2010. However, Wheaton College has contributed additional funds to allow us to retain Nicole, originally hired on a year-long appointment, for one more year. This extension will enable her to start cataloging our dissertation and archival collection, and will make even more Wade materials searchable online. To see what Wade materials you can already find that way, follow this link and type your desired search in the box provided:

<http://library.wheaton.edu/WadeCenterSearch> **W**

