

Dating the Undated Poems in Don King's *Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis: A Critical Edition*

**Introduction**

Don W. King made a monumental contribution to Lewis studies when he released his *Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis: A Critical Edition*. Prior to this volume, Lewis's poetry was scattered among at least four books and much remained unpublished. King gathered almost all of Lewis's poetry into a single volume but for a few poetic fragments. Since the book's publication in 2015 a handful Lewis poems have been discovered, but that the vast majority of Lewis's poetry exists for us in a single volume remains a huge step forward in Lewis scholarship and our ability to appreciate Lewis as poet. King's approach was to publish the poems in chronological order, assigning dates based on a variety of factors including year of publication and the appearance of poems in dated letters. In some instances, King had to offer his best scholarly guess, giving "circa" dates to the poems, and in the case of 47 poems, King was able to provide no date at all. These poems he placed in a section at the back of the *Critical Edition*.

I saw these poems as a challenge, given a Lewis research project I've been pursuing since 2011. In that year I discovered that Lewis's handwriting changed throughout his lifetime. It occurred to me at that time that if these changes were charted, this data could be used to date undated Lewis manuscripts. The resulting Lewis Handwriting Chart or LHC was published in 2016 under the title "Villainous Handwriting," a phrase Lewis himself used to describe his penmanship in later years. The chart was published in volume 33 of *VII: The Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center*.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Wade published a supplement to the essay online with samples of Lewis's handwriting available for all interested scholars to make use of.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie W. Starr. "Villainous Handwriting: A Chronological Study of C. S. Lewis's Script." *VII: The Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center* (vol. 33). Wheaton Il.: The Marion E. Wade Center, 2016. 73-94.

<sup>2</sup> Supplement to "Villainous Handwriting." <https://www.wheaton.edu/media/migrated-images-amp-files/media/files/centers-and-institutes/wade-center/vii/vii20online20articles/Lewis-Handwriting-Chart-Online.pdf>

information not available to Don King when attempting to date the undated poems in his collection is now available. The poems can be dated using Lewis's handwriting.

However, as the creator of the LHC, I'm the first person to caution that the Chart is not a panacea for all Lewis manuscript ills. Later years are more difficult to assign dates to than earlier years and Lewis's hand alters when he, for example, writes fair copies of texts (especially poems), potentially reverting to an earlier form (a point which I suspect to be the case but which remains unproven). I've discussed these limitations at length in the "Villainous Handwriting" essay in *VII*. So I firmly believe in the importance of combining the LHC with other dating methods where possible; however, there are Lewis manuscripts for which no external or biographical information is yet available, and when there is no other way to date a Lewis manuscript, the LHC makes reliable dating possible.

Another important caveat, however, is that dating a manuscript does not necessarily date the original composition, especially of Lewis's poems. In assigning a date to a manuscript, we may be dealing with a poem that was written earlier (even much earlier) of which the manuscript before us is a fair copy. Thus, when assigning a date to a poem, we must always remember that we're assigning a date to a manuscript which may not reflect original composition date. But again, Don King was unable to assign *any* dates at all to the poems here in question. By dating a manuscript which could not be dated before, we narrow in on the poem's composition date.

There are two appendices to this essay. The first is an appendix of 39 poems with **Date Corrections, Confirmations, or Narrowings** where I have used the LHC and other clue information when available to confirm, narrow or change dates that do appear in the King volume. The second appendix is a complete list of **the Undated Poems in Don King's *Collected Poems*** with dates assigned to all but two of the poems (titles used are those in King's edition). In

this essay I will highlight a few of the more interesting date discoveries and their implications and leave the rest to the appendices.

A final note: I have always appreciated how work among Lewis scholars has tended to be collegial rather than confrontational. I hope that practice continues. That said, I have not produced this study in an effort to point out the flaws in the excellent work Don King has achieved. After I approached Don about working on this project, he expressed to me his view of his work as a beginning place for others to build on. I'd call it more of a significant foundation. So in doing this work, I have not only kept Don in the loop, but consulted with him on it. Don has reviewed and consulted on the dates of the poems, and where he would continue to refine any of the assigned dates, I have provided a note to indicate so in the appendices. Finally, I would add that I had a great deal of help from Andrew Lazo on this project as well.

### **Some of the More Interesting Dates/Findings**

As is often the case in the work of scholarship, what one scholar misses, another finds. While King had no date for the poem cycle, "Five Sonnets," Joel Heck was later able to identify a letter by Lewis to Sheldon Vanauken which included the sonnets. The letter was written in June 1955.<sup>3</sup> Upon examining a copy of the sonnets in Lewis's hand, I faced the difficulty of wanting to date them to the mid-1940s by their handwriting. This little mystery was solved by Don King who, upon reviewing the letter, pointed me to a line in which Lewis says, the sonnets were "written about ten years ago."<sup>4</sup> This note in a letter written in 1955 confirmed my date via handwriting analysis of the mid-40s, and so we can date this manuscript of the poems to the mid-40s and with some confidence that they were *composed* at that time as well. Significant to the

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<sup>3</sup> Letter of 5 June 1955 to Sheldon Vanauken. *C. S. Lewis Collected Letters, Volume III*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006. 616-17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 617.

dating are the fourth and fifth sonnets which tell of a bee trying to find its way beyond a window pane out into the paradisaal world of flowers and grass, an image echoed in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in the form of a bluebottle (housefly) which never made its way beyond the glass and died upon a windowsill never reaching the land of promise before it.<sup>5</sup> Composed in the mid-40s, rather than the mid-50s, we now know that the image of the bee in Lewis's poem buzzed about in his head for some years before finding a second expression in the first Narnia tale.

The poem, "Lines During a General Election" is a very nice example of a mystery solved from disparate pieces of evidence. It also gives us an insight into Lewis's poetic process. The poem itself was written sometime in the 50s judging by handwriting alone. But anything Lewis wrote later in life is more difficult to date as changes in his handwriting became more subtle by then. So just by handwriting analysis, I at first had to admit that the poem could have been written a little earlier than the 50s and, though less likely, possibly into the 60s. Not much narrowing down there yet. The obvious next step was to take the title into account: "Lines During a General Election." Here I saw a helpful clue and so asked when were there general elections in the UK? Michael Ward kindly provided the information: within the target range of the 1950s to which I assigned the handwriting, there were elections in 1945, 1950, 1951, 1955, and 1959. There are elements in the text, however, which don't look to belong to Lewis's handwriting in the mid-40s. I rejected the '45 date with a fair amount if not absolute confidence. The letter 'f' is a key letter to focus on in Lewis's writing at this time, and the 'f's in the "Lines" poem look to me to have been written later. I also rejected the later date of 1959, again for reasons having to do with the way Lewis writes the letter 'f.' It undergoes a slight change around

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis. *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 5.

1957 (see the LHC). That leaves 1950, 1951 or 1955. I cannot confidently narrow the date more, but my inclination based on handwriting alone is to assign an earlier date to the poem. In short, then, given the title of the poem, the dates at hand for general elections, and my Lewis Handwriting Chart analysis, I reached the following conclusions: Probably 1950, or 1951. Possibly 1955. And I cannot completely rule out 1945 or 1959, but I very much doubt these dates.

There is one more interesting point to be made about the date of “Lines During a General Election” which, as I mentioned above, tells us something of Lewis’s creative process. Lewis took the last three lines from a poem he wrote ca. 1934-1939 (I tend to think toward the end of that period) and with some revision included them as the last three lines of this poem!<sup>6</sup> Lewis frequently revisited and rewrote poems. More so than with his prose, Lewis tinkered with his poetry throughout his lifetime, often producing multiple, even contradictory versions the same poems.<sup>7</sup>

King’s date for the poem “How Can I ask Thee, Father” is 1939-40 with a question mark in brackets beside the date.<sup>8</sup> The date makes sense given the content of the poem which is a prayer for the safety of Lewis’s brother in war-time. In their excellent study of the Inklings, *The Fellowship*, Philip and Carol Zaleski wrote that in 1940 Lewis brooded “over Warnie’s safety.” They wrote of Lewis: “Afraid that prayers might amount to doubting God’s providence, he scribbled in his notebook, ‘How can I ask thee Father to defend / In peril of war my brother’s

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<sup>6</sup> The unpublished poem, beginning, “Horrible will the history of our planet be,” is in a notebook currently in Walter Hooper’s possession. The notebook contains 40 Lewis poems recorded as fair copy version between approximately 1929 and approximately 1939 (based on LHC handwriting analysis). The poems are numbered with Roman numerals and two are mis-numbered (so that the last of the 40 poems is numbered as 38). The poem, “Horrible Will the History of Our Planet Be” is numbered XXXV (35).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, the poem “What the Bird Said Early in the Year” (as titled in Hooper’s *The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis*, 85) or “Chanson D’Adventure” (as titled in King’s *Collected Poems: A Critical Edition*, 322-3). The version published in the King edition adds a stanza which completely changes the meaning of the poem.

<sup>8</sup> In King’s *Collected Poems* 325.

head to-day.’ But pray he did, answering his question with additional lines suggesting that prayer is a way to share God’s ‘eternal will.’”<sup>9</sup> The notebook to which the Zaleskis refer is probably the notebook which also contains the recently published *Early Prose Joy*.<sup>10</sup> This notebook remains in the possession of Walter Hooper; however, I have been able to examine portions of the notebook during which time I found a copy of “How Can I Ask Thee, Father.” What I found was a poem that was clearly written between November of 1931 and sometime in 1933—this based on handwriting analysis. Lewis’s earlier writing can be dated more easily than his later writing. There is very little leeway for subjective opinion. All of Lewis’s handwriting in the early 30s has very distinct dating markers. This poem appeared to be written much earlier than the date given by either Don King or the Zaleskis. But the context seemed to fit the later date, so again I was presented with a mystery.

This one was solved by luck as I was reading through volume two of Lewis’s *Collected Letters* one day. There I found the following biographical note from Walter Hooper: “Jack was very afraid that Warnie, who had been in Shanghai since 17 November 1931, was in danger from a Japanese attack on the Chinese part of that city.”<sup>11</sup> Advances on the part of the Japanese military in China were worldwide headline news, and Lewis’s brother Warnie was in the thick of it. Though he never experienced any direct action, his brother back home was worried. Jack Lewis expressed his concern in a letter to his brother of 15 February 1932: “Anxiety is of all troubles the one that lends itself least to description. Of course we have been and are infernally bothered about you...”<sup>12</sup> According to handwriting analysis, the dates of which match up perfectly to the end of 1931 and 1932, this was the time and context in which Lewis wrote the

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<sup>9</sup> P. and C. Zaleski. *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*, 285-6.

<sup>10</sup> First published in *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, volume 30, 2013. 13-50. Edited by Andrew Lazo.

<sup>11</sup> *Collected Letters Volume II*. 2004. 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Collected Letters II*, 45.

poem, “How Can I Ask Thee, Father.” Consider how much closer this moment was to Lewis’s conversion to Christianity (in late 1931). The young Christian showed both his doubts and his acute spiritual insight at the beginning of his journey in the faith he took so many years to come to.

One result of dating these poems has surprised me, and that is to see the amount of poetry Lewis produced around the time of his Theistic and Christian conversions. Not even a complete list of all the poems in King’s volume which were written in 1929-1931, the appendices contain 23 poems written between February 1929 and July 1930 (seven of which are dated for the first time) and six more written between August 1930 and October 1931. Lewis was especially prolific as a poet in 1930 and especially the summer months of 1930 when he first became a Theist. I think this reveals a significant quality of Lewis the man. Lewis wrote a letter to Arthur Greeves on 18 August 1930 (a couple of months after Lewis’s conversion to Theism according to Alister McGrath and Andrew Lazo<sup>13</sup>) in which he wanted to offer some comfort to his friend who had just received a rejection notice on a book. According to Walter Hooper,

Lewis wrote...to say that they were both in the same boat because God was being merciful in not allowing them a literary success later to be revealed a “dust and ashes”. It is tempting, he said, to suppose that it would be “ample bliss” if your book was published even if it was read only by your friends. “This is an *absolute delusion*...I am *still* as disappointed an author as you. From age sixteen onwards I had one single ambition, from which I never wavered, in the persecution of which I spent every ounce I could, on wh. I really & deliberately staked my whole contentment: and I recognized myself as having

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<sup>13</sup> See Lazo’s “C. S. Lewis Got it Wrong.” *First Things* online. 8/8/13. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/08/c-s-lewis-got-it-wrong>

unmistakably failed in it...Depend upon it, unless God has abandoned us, he will find means to cauterize that side somehow or other.”<sup>14</sup>

The ambition on which young C. S. Lewis staked his life was not just to be an author but a poet. He considered himself a failure because his books had been, in terms of sales and critical reception, duds.

Hooper continues:

In his next letter, of 28 August 1930, Lewis admitted that now that he no longer regarded himself “officially as an author” ideas had begun to “bubble and simmer”. “It is a very remarkable thing,” he said, “that in the few religious lyrics which I have written during the last year, in which I had no idea of publication & at first very little idea even of showing them to friends, I have found myself impelled to take infinitely more pains, less ready to be contented with the fairly good and more determined to reach the best attainable, than ever I was in the days when I never wrote without the ardent hope of successful publication” (xv).

Once being a poet no longer mattered, writing poetry became a passion for Lewis again.

More to the point, Lewis’s strongest response to becoming a Theist was an outpouring of poetry. The man who thought he’d failed as a poet, lifted up his worship to God in the form of some of the best poetry he ever wrote. There’s even a real possibility, based on the LHC, that Lewis wrote a significant number of poems in only a six-week period in June and July of 1930, responding to his finally confirmed belief in God by pouring out poems as an act of praise to Him. Lewis the failed poet, first loved his God by practicing poetry with a passion. Other stories

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<sup>14</sup> Hooper, Intro to *Collected Poems* xiv-xv.



could be told about the process of dating these poems, but what significant information remains is summarized in the appendices below.

Note: In the appendices, I do not delineate in detail why I dated every poem as I did. If there is no explanation, the date was arrived at entirely by my knowledge of Lewis's handwriting as detailed in the published Lewis Handwriting Chart to which I refer Lewis scholars for checking my dating accuracy. The chart was used to varying degrees for dating *every* poem. If I found additional corroborating evidence of any kind, I summarize it after the date.

## Appendix One

### Date Corrections, Confirmations, Narrowings

“The Hedgehog Moralised” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“Save Yourself. Run and Leave Me. I Must Go Back” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“I Woke from a Fool’s Dream to Find All Spent” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“Essence” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“He Whom I Bow To” Summer, 1930.

“You Rest Upon Me All My Days” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“Thou Only Art Alternative to God” Aug. 1930 – Oct. 1931.

“Nearly They Stood Who Fall” July 1930.

“I Have Scraped Clean the Plateau” 1932 – 1933 (published in ’33 so probably ‘32—King’s date

of 29-30 may be correct, but the earliest existing *written* ms. is probably from 1932)

Note: there is a ms. version titled “Virtue’s Independence” by Lewis himself—King

should have kept that original title, but he did not have access to that version when

putting his collection together.

“Because of Endless Pride” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“When Lilith Means to Draw Me” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“Once the Worm-laid Egg Broke in the Wood” Feb 1929 – July 1930 – There’s a good chance it

was in the summer of 1930; Lewis became a Theist in June of that summer and the poem

has Theistic themes.

“I Am Not One that Easily Flits Past in Thought” Summer 1930.

“Passing To-Day by a Cottage, I Shed Tears” Summer 1930.

“The Shortest Way Home” Feb. 1929 July 1930.

“They Tell Me Lord that When I Seem” Spring/Summer 1930.

“Set on the Soul’s Acropolis the Reason Stands” 1934 – 1938 – King’s date of 1929-30 may be accurate, but the earliest handwritten ms. of the poem comes from the later 30s, no earlier than 1934 (between ’34 and ’39). Malcolm Guite and Michael Ward have been engaged in friendly debate on the date the poem was composed. Guite sees it as an expression of Lewis’s thought prior to his conversion (which fits King’s date). Ward sees it as a later reflection—Lewis looking back on a key moment in his life. The date of the existing ms. Favors Ward’s view; however, the ms. is recorded in a notebook filled with Lewis poems in fair copy fashion (see footnote 6 above) and may have been added several years after its initial composition.

“The Queen of Drum” may have been begun as early as July 1930 – Oct. 1931, but this dating is not a certainty.

“Scholar’s Melancholy” King dates to 1933 – 1934 with a question mark—his date is definitely correct, no question mark needed.

“The Planets” King’s date of 1934 – 1935 has a question mark. I can confirm the accuracy of the date.

“Sonnet” (on page 319 in King) I can confirm King’s date of 1935 – 1936.

“Chanson D’Aventure” I can confirm King’s date of 1937 – 1938.

“Experiment” I can confirm King’s date of 1937 – 1938.

“Hermione in the House of Paulina” 1937 – 1939 – ’38 or ’39 seem likely but not 1940.

“How Can I Ask Thee Father” Nov 1931 – 1933 (probably earlier than later—I think 1932) – earlier than the date offered by King and the Zaleskis.

“Break, Sun, My Crusted Earth” – there is an early version of this poem from Feb. 1929 – July

1930 – earlier than the date offered by King; *however*, the version in the *Collection* is very likely from the date he gives.

“The World is Round” 1937 – 1939 (I lean toward ’38).

“Arise My Body” 1937 – 1938.

“Out of the Wound We Pluck” Aug. 1930 – Oct. 1931 – This is earlier than the date offered by King.

“To G. M.” – King’s date of 1942 is possible but there’s a chance the poem was written in the late 30s.

“On Receiving Bad News” Oct. 1926 – Jan. 1929 – This is earlier than King’s date.

“The Birth of Language” – King’s date (’45-’46) may be accurate but there could be a version as early as 1940 – 1941 (or maybe ’42).

“On Being Human” 1941 – 1946 – But more likely the early 40s than the ’46 date King offers – I lean toward ’42.

“Solomon” 1941 – 1946 – But more likely the early 40s than the ’46 date King offers – I lean toward ’42.

“Two Kinds of Memory” 1946 – 1947.

“Donkey’s Delight” Two mss. – One is probably 1947 as King dates it, but there’s an earlier one from 1941 – 1943.

“The Sailing of the Ark” 1947 – 1948.

“Late Summer” – There is a longer version of the poem written in 1938, ten years prior to the version King publishes and dates.

“Adam at Night” 1941 – 1943 – This is earlier than King’s date.

## Appendix Two

### **Dates for the Undated Poems in Don King's *Collected Poems***

“The Ecstasy” 1950 – 1956 (possibility of late 40s to late 50s).

“The Saboteuse” 1950 – 1956 (possibility of late 40s to late 50s).

“Prelude to Space: An Epithalamium” 1950 – 1956 (possibility of late 40s to late 50s).

“On a Vulgar Error” 1957 – 1958 (possibly mid 50s or into the 60s).

“Lines During a General Election” 1950 – 1951 – Lewis took the last three lines from a poem he wrote ca. 1934 – 1939 (probably later in this period—the unpublished poem is in a notebook in Walter Hooper’s possession) and included a revised version of them in this poem (where they are also the last three lines) which he wrote in 1950 or 1951 (or possibly 1955) during the year of a General Election.

“You Do Not Love the Bourgeoisie” 1934 – 1935.

“Dear Roy – Why Should Each Wowzer on the List” 1945 – 1946 (possibly ’44 and possible between ’47 – ’52 but mid 40s seems most likely).

“Infatuation” 1926 – See *All My Road Before Me* page 403, Lewis’s text and Hooper’s note.

“Aubade” 1959 – 1963 (possibly as far back as ’57).

“To Andrew Marvell” 1947 – 1952 (tentative date—possibly later in the 50s).

“Lines Written in a Copy of Milton’s Work” – REMAINS UNDATED.

“Through Our Lives Thy Meshes Run” Feb. 1929 – July 1930 (possibly June/July ’30).

“Such Natural Love Twixt Beast and Man” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“When the Grape of Night is Pressed” Aug. 1930 – Oct. 1931.

“Till Your Alchemic Beams Turn All to Gold” Feb. 1929 – July 1930 (possibly a few months later).

“These Faint Wavering Far-travelled Gleams” Feb. 1929 – July 1930 (possibly summer ’30).

“The Phoenix Flew into My Garden” 1950 – 1956 – Joe Christopher has made an excellent argument for a date of 1953 in his essay, “C. S. Lewis and Joy Davidman Disagree about a Phoenix.” *The Faithful Imagination: Papers From the 2018 Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C. S. Lewis & Friends*. Eds. Joe Ricke and Ashley Chu. Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2019. 104-122.

“The Nativity” 1953 – Ruth Cording in *C. S. Lewis: A Celebration of His Life* provides this date. The handwriting matches it.

“Love’s as Warm as Tears” 1955 – 1960 – Don King believes the context of this poem is Joy Gresham’s illness and so argues a date later in this period, but not going back beyond 1956.

“Yes, You Are Always Everywhere” 1957 – 1959 (possibly into the 60s).

“Stephen to Lazarus” 1955 – 1958 (slight possibility of later, but Don King favors this date).

“Five Sonnets” mid-1940s – A letter from Lewis to Sheldon Vanauken in 1955 claims the poems were written “about a decade ago”; LHC puts them in the mid-40s.

“Now the Night is Creeping” 1934 – 1939 (possibly the mid years of this period).

“Lady to This Fair Breast I know but One” tentative date of early to mid-1950s with later 40s being possible.

“Have You Not Seen that in Our Days” tentative date of early to mid-1950s with later 40s being possible.

“Strange that a Trick of Light and Shade Could Look” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“If We Had Remembered” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“Spirit? Who Names Her Lies” Oct. 1926 – Jan. 1929 – Don King believes the poem to have

been written later in this period rather than earlier.

“All Things” tentative date of early to mid-1950s with later 40s being possible.

“Lady, a Better Sculptor Far” tentative date of early to mid-1950s with later 40s being possible.

“Erected by Her Sorrowing Brothers” tentative date of early to mid-1950s with later 40s being possible.

“Here Lies One Kind of Speech” tentative date of early to mid-1950s with later 40s being possible.

“An Age Will Come” 1934 – 1939 (possibly later in this period).

“As Long as Rolling Wheels Rotate” mid to late 1940s (I lean toward mid-40s).

“But in All Dialects” Oct. 1926 – Jan. 1929 (perhaps '28).

“Fidelia Vulnera Amantis” Sept. 1929. Lewis was at Little Lea, his Irish home, from August 11<sup>th</sup> to September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1929 and told the recipient of the letter in which the poem was included, “if replying soon,” to send to that address.

“Finchley Avenue” 1938-40 – It’s a fair copy in the Bodleian Lewis notebook, Dep. d. 809. LHC says ’34-’39 – I think that could stretch a little farther into the 40s, but I doubt it’s later than 41 or 42 and think 40 at the latest more likely; and while by handwriting alone it could be dated earlier, its placement in Dep. d. 809 and the content surrounding it suggest later in the period rather than earlier.

“Go Litel Tugge upon thes Watres Shene” 1934 – 1939 (possibly later in this period which Don King believes to be the case).

“If with Posterity Good Fame” 1923 – 1924 (possibly '22).

“Laertes to Napoleon” Aug. 1930 – Oct. 1931.

“Lines to Mr. Compton Mackenzie” 1947 – 1954 (probably the 50s).

“Of This Great Suit Who Dares Foresee the End” Feb. 1929 – July 1930.

“That Was an Ugly Age” 1956 – 1959.

“The Goodly Fair” 1934 – 1939 (probably ’36 – ’38).

“To Mrs. Dyson, Angrie” – REMAINS UNDATED.

“Tu Silentia Perosus” Oct. 1926 – Jan. 1929.

“Yah!” Aug. 1930 – Oct. 1931.