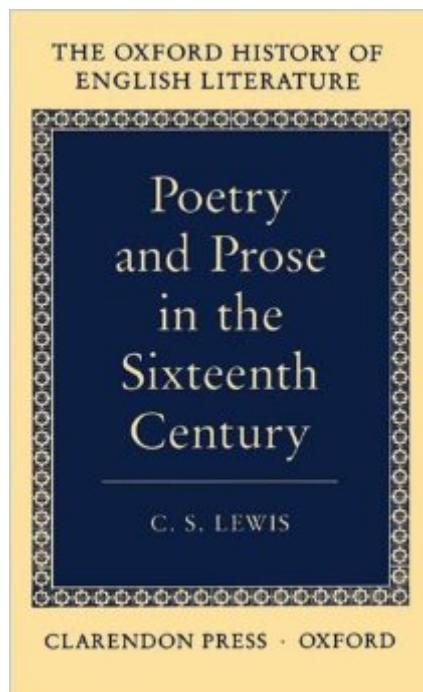


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Poetry And Prose In The Sixteenth Century (Oxford History Of English Literature)



Synopsis

This book is intended for students of English literature at A' level and above; general readers interested in a complete history of literature from Middle English to the earlier twentieth century.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Commissioned as a volume in "The Oxford History of English Literature", "English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama", as it was originally titled, proved such tedium to write that Lewis took to referring to it by the acronym "OHEL". The sixteenth century ends as one of the great ages - arguably the greatest - of English literary genius, but it began dismally. Except in Scotland, where a vigorous Medieval tradition lived on, "authors seem to have forgotten the lessons which had been mastered in the Middle Ages and learned little in their stead. Their prose is clumsy, monotonous, garrulous; their verse either astonishingly tame and cold or, if it attempts to rise, the coarsest fustian. . . . Nothing is light, or tender, or fresh. All the authors write like elderly men." This period of "bludgeon-work" gave way to something almost worse, "the Drab Age" - "earnest, heavy-handed, commonplace", a time when England did not shine and the peripheral light of Scotland guttered out. The story would scarcely be worth telling, save for the happy ending, a true eucatastrophe: "Then, in the last quarter of the century, the unpredictable happens. With startling suddenness, we ascend. Fantasy, conceit, paradox, color, incantation return. Youth returns. The fine frenzies of ideal love and ideal war are readmitted. Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Hooker . . .

display what is almost a new culture: that culture which was to last through most of the seventeenth century and enrich the very meanings of the words England and Aristocracy. Nothing in the earlier history of our period would have enabled the sharpest observer to foresee this transformation.

Tolkien, in a letter to George Sayer as recorded in his biography *JACK: A LIFE OF C. S. LEWIS*, says that this is "a great book, the only one of his [Lewis's] that gives me unalloyed pleasure." Coming from Tolkien, this is very high praise indeed. Originally published as *ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY EXCLUDING DRAMA* and for some inexplicable reason recently renamed, this book, Lewis's longest work, will not be found in the libraries of the casual C. S. Lewis fan for the simple fact that it is a textbook and is aimed not at the general reader but instead the academic world (even in those days there was that damned phenomena of 'publish or perish!'). For those who are studying this material, however, will find the book a very remarkable one at that. As a previous reviewer noted, Lewis began referring to this text as "O Hell!" as the writing process became very tedious to him. This book was ten years in the writing, and by the time it was ended Lewis wanted to concentrate more on theology and Narnia than this "critical nonsense." The end sections of the book do not shore this weariness, however, so have no fear. Although books of this sort always, by necessity, impose artificial time lines on literature which, in the long run, do not have a lot to do with the true literary history. To study literature in the sixteenth century, one should not confine oneself to going behind or in front of the time line to get a fuller understanding of the significance of the text. However, this is not really a fault of Lewis and it is a very difficult error to correct for literary historians. However, Lewis pulls off this artificial time limit very well by clearly illustrating the many strengths and the many weaknesses of this century's literature.

Earlier this summer, I visited a place on Mount Rainier I hadn't been to in more than thirty years. It was a splendid day: glaciers towered above clouds, which wafted over ridges rising out of evergreen forests, with waterfalls tumbling down, a cinnamon-phase black bear grubbing for eats on the far bank of a glacial river, deep snow fields, and dozens of kinds of wildflowers sprinkled across the meadows. Since my last visit to that spot, I've read almost everything C. S. Lewis had written, in some cases many times -- except for this book. It is almost as majestic, in its own way, as the mountain. Here's a daunting piece of topographical data: a 92 page bibliography. Lewis takes time to briefly introduce thousands of books in it, often with notes on their quality and what you'll find. Got a couple lifetimes to spare? But every trip begins with a single step, and Lewis is walking through a

century. He gives a little more weight in this narrative to poets than prose writers, and about as much to the last 20 years of the century, as to the first 80. Not being a scholar of English literature, I found some of the early citations a bit hard to make out -- the language becomes easier for us non-specialists as the century draws on. The "wild flowers" visible on this mountain are snippets of poetry Lewis quotes. The "bears" and other wildlife might be compared to the sometimes scruffy writers, whom he describes with consummate literary skill. One of the remarkable qualities of Lewis' work is the variety of genres to which he contributed. Tolkien may have found Narnia glib, but most of us enjoyed it. *Till We Have Faces* is, I think, better than some Nobel-Prize winning novels.

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