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A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War
**New Book Explores Influence of World War I on the Work and
Friendship of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis**

The First World War devastated Europe and permanently altered the global political and cultural landscape. For a generation of men and women, it brought the end of innocence, and for many, the end of faith. Yet for two extraordinary authors and friends, the Great War deepened their spiritual quest. Historian Joseph Loconte tells their story in *A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War: How J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis Rediscovered Faith, Friendship, and Heroism in the Cataclysm of 1914-18* (Nelson Books, Hardcover \$24.99. On Sale June 30, 2015).

Both men served at the Western Front. Tolkien fought at the Battle of the Somme, “one of the fiercest concentrations of killing in the history of human conflict”; and Lewis endured months of trench warfare. They both lost most of their closest friends in the war, and remained haunted by the memories throughout their lives. Somehow, these two young soldiers—Tolkien was 24 when he was sent to the Somme, and Lewis arrived at the front on his nineteenth birthday— managed to survive the delirium of the war with their souls intact.

While many writers and artists of their generation lost their faith in God under the immense burden of loss placed on them by the war, Tolkien and Lewis held onto theirs. “They deployed their Christian conscience to challenge a prevailing culture of postwar grief, gloom, and unbelief,” Loconte writes. Tolkien and Lewis produced epic stories infused with themes of guilt and grace, sorrow and consolation. Though tempered by the grim realities of combat, they reclaimed an older literary tradition extolling heroism and sacrifice, insisting that war could inspire noble sacrifice for humane purposes.

The experience of war provided much of the raw material for the characters and themes of their imaginative works, Loconte shows: “No soldier, especially one with Tolkien’s literary cast of mind, could ever forget the experience. Thus the battle scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* possess a grim authenticity. When Tolkien described the Siege of Gondor—where the ‘fires leaped up’ and ‘great engines crawled across the field’ and the ground ‘was choked with wreck and with bodies of the slain,’ he delivered the realism of the war veteran.”

Lewis, who had been an atheist, might have taken the path of other war authors and embraced disillusionment and cynicism. His conversion to Christianity was helped along by Tolkien during their famous late night debate many years after the war, about ancient myths and the meaning of the ancient faith.

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Loconte shows how “the proposition that every person is caught up in an epic contest between Light and Darkness,” is illustrated in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The two authors “sought to recover the romantic and mythic traditions based on the struggle between good and evil, but they declined to sanctify war as a divine undertaking,” Loconte says. “The characters in their works often display a great ambivalence toward conflict.”

A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War is the first book to examine the work of Tolkien and Lewis in the context of the cultural and spiritual crises sparked by the war. “Tolkien and Lewis offer an understanding of the human story that is both tragic and hopeful: they suggest that war is a symptom of the ruin and wreckage of human life, but that it points the way to a life restored and transformed by grace,” says Loconte.

Joseph Loconte is an Associate Professor of History at the King’s College in New York City, where he teaches courses on Western Civilization and US Foreign Policy. His previous titles include *God, Locke, and Liberty: The Struggle for Religious Freedom in the West*, and *The Searchers: A Quest for Faith in the Valley of Doubt*. His commentary on international religious freedom, democracy, and human rights has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* and *The Weekly Standard*.

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