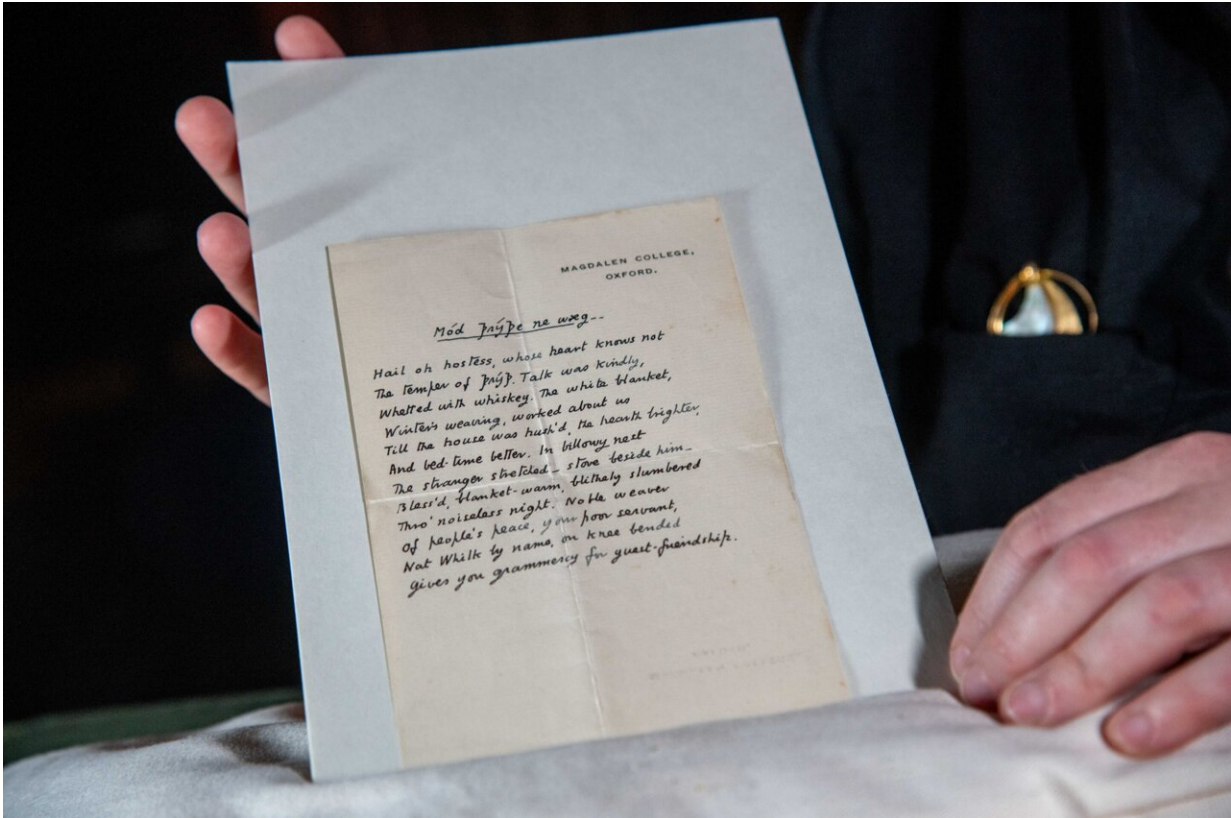


Uncovering a CS Lewis poem

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Literary Archivist Sarah Prescott holds 'Mód Þryþe Ne Wæg' Credit: CS Lewis Pte Ltd

A forgotten poem by Chronicles of Narnia author CS Lewis reveals details of friendships between fantasy writers and medievalists at the University of Leeds.

The 1935 poem, 'Mód Þrýþe Ne Wæg,' was among a bundle of documents sold to the University's Special Collections a decade ago.

It reveals Lewis' friendship with the Gordons, a [married couple](#) and Leeds medievalists who were also good friends with Lord of the Rings author JRR Tolkien.

The poem was unearthed by Dr. Andoni Cossio, a researcher at the University of the Basque Country and the University of Glasgow when he was exploring the University's Tolkien-Gordon Collection. It has been published for the first time in the [Journal of Inklings Studies](#) with a critical commentary by Dr. Cossio.

Dr. Andoni Cossio said, "The moment I first read the manuscript, I was enraptured by its content. It had everything I could wish for: biographical details, Old English, an alliterative meter, and Lewis's writing at its best."

"It was soon obvious that it had passed completely unnoticed since its private owner transferred it to the University of Leeds in 2014. To discover the poem's secrets, I would have to do the research myself."

Whisky, 'Beowulf' and warm blankets

The Old English title is complicated to translate as it involves playful references to Beowulf—the famous epic that Lewis taught at Oxford University.

Using the pen name 'Nat Whilk'—Old English for 'someone'—Lewis thanks Leeds alum Dr. Ida Lilian Gordon and her husband, Professor of English Language Eric Valentine (EV) Gordon, for a recent visit to the body of the poem. The poem praises the couple's Manchester home for its whisky, white blankets, and warmth in modern English.

The scholarly couple was influential among fantasy writers, including Tolkien, who wrote *The Gordons*, an Old English bridal song as a wedding present in 1930.

Then, after a later stay with the Gordons, Tolkien penned a thank-you poem referencing Lewis' visit, helping Dr. Cossio to date 'Mód Þrýpe Ne Wæg' to early 1935.

Medievalist minds

While EV Gordon and Tolkien both worked in Leeds' English department, they started a Viking Club where they would read Old Icelandic texts while drinking beer.

They also co-wrote with other authors a collection of songs for scholars and a new edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a late 14th-century alliterative poem featuring one of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

Ida had a Ph.D. in Philology (history of language) from Leeds, and after her husband's sudden death in 1938, she started teaching at the University of Manchester to support their four young children.

A letter from Tolkien also reveals that Lewis offered Ida financial support after her husband's death, showing their close friendship.

But the Gordons' friendship with Lewis has been overlooked until now, as biographies and letters have only recorded a professional relationship when EV was a visiting examiner at Oxford.

In contrast, it is well recorded that Lewis and Tolkien became friends at Oxford and started an informal society of writers called 'The Inklings', which met weekly to read and comment on its members' work—a key

part of the development of Narnia and Middle-earth.

For Tolkien, Lewis, and their circle, poetry was a way to explore their shared love of language and lore and to develop their own writing. Dr. Cossio added, "The thing I like most about this poem is that it opens a little door to that world."

Sarah Prescott, Literary Archivist in Special Collections at the University of Leeds (pictured above), said, "The Tolkien-Gordon collection is a relatively recent acquisition for the University Library which filled a gap in our holdings on Tolkien's time at Leeds, something of perennial interest to researchers."

"It gives a rich insight into Tolkien's developing work and the lifelong impact relationships formed at the University would have on him. It has also allowed researchers to explore the significance of EV and Ida Gordon, both as friends of Tolkien and significant scholars in their own right."

"This exciting discovery by Dr. Cossio really brings the significance of this period at Leeds to life—we're very excited to be now able to say we have an original CS Lewis [poem](#) in our collections, too!"

"We look forward to welcoming more people to Special Collections to study the Collection to see what further insights can be found."

More information: Andoni Cossio, The Unpublished 'Mód Þrýpe Ne Wæg' by C.S. Lewis: A Critical Edition, *Journal of Inklings Studies* (2024). [DOI: 10.3366/ink.2024.0216](https://doi.org/10.3366/ink.2024.0216)

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