

DAVID HALL talks to an author who has written a sequel to C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* and discovers that the new book is a homage to Oxford

How not to sell your soul to the devil

Christmas at Magdalen College -even without snow - was one of the reasons Norman Jetmundsen fell in love with the city of Oxford - and Magdalen in particular. An American law student, he spent three years being captivated by the city but also wallowing in the atmosphere of a college which had been the home of C. S. Lewis - one of the great influences in Mr. Jetmundsen's life.

In particular the American, who is now 45 and an attorney dealing with civil litigation, dreamed of expanding the C. S. Lewis classic, *Screwtape Letters*.

"I really wanted to find more letters and allow the story to continue," he said. It was a dream, but one which saw its fulfilment in 1994, when his wife Kelli gave birth to triplets - all boys. "The tremendous emotion was thrilling," said Mr Jetmundsen. "But at the same time I wondered what sort of world we were bringing them into."

For that reason he was inspired to get on to his word processor and face up to the painstaking challenge he has set himself - adding to the *Screwtape Letters* -- as a way of making his own statement on the state of the world.

When he had written a series of letters and other documents to and from Foulheart - an archdevil - and Soulbane he showed them to a close friend who suggested that they needed a storyline to give them more weight.

Back at the drawing board Mr Jetmundsen produced a novel about an American student at Magdalen College, Cade Bryson, who discovers some letters on a winter evening in the college library. The pre-Christmas discovery sets Bryson on a course of investigation which leads to him realising that he is being confronted by sinister forces.

He visits the island of Malta and a re-creation of Magdalen in America as he searches for the truth behind the documents - aided by fellow student Rachael, with whom he falls in love.

The book - **The Soulbane Stratagem** (John Hunt Publishing, £14.99) -expresses Norman Jetmundsen's concerns about the way the world is slipping away from Christian roots and values, particularly those of family life.

His love of Oxford is evident in the descriptive passages, for which he bore in mind the words of Mark Twain - "Only write about what you know." In parts the book is almost a guide to the city.

For fans of the *Screwtape Letters* and its sequel *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, it takes a welcome step along a route well defined by C. S. Lewis. I do not think the great Christian author would be disappointed, even though some of the novel's pace occurs when the storyline takes on the obvious route rather than looking for a more surprising twist.

It is not only Norman Jetmundsen's first novel but the first novel to be published by John Hunt, who previously concentrated on children's literature.

"I was introduced to John Hunt through a friend, Robert Fraley," said Mr Jetmundsen. But there was a touch of sadness in the memory. For Robert, a sports agent, died with the American golfing ace Payne Stewart when the aircraft in which Stewart was travelling crashed in October. It was probably the only sad note to mar the author's return to Oxford -the city he loved so much that his honeymoon had hardly been completed when he brought his wife to Oxford "to show off the city and introduce her to my friends." One of those friends was Magdalen scout Tony Jones, to whom the book is partly dedicated.

A Christian for many years - an Episcopal Church member - Norman Jetmundsen has created a couple of horrors, Soulband and Foulheart. "I am keen to write a sequel but want to wait until I see how this one sells first," he said. "I want to take a different approach." So we may not have heard the last of the evil duo - or this promising new author.