

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

NO. 5, SPRING, 1977

A.G.M: NOMINATIONS OF COUNCIL MEMBERS

Under the Society's constitution the Council consists of the Society's officers and not more than four other members. In future, Council members who are officers will hold office for three years, and other members for one year. On this, the occasion of the Society's first Annual General Meeting, however, the constitution provides that the whole Council must retire (although eligible for re-election). Nominations of candidates for membership should reach the General Secretaries, Mr. and Mrs. E. C. R. Hadfield, at The White Cottage, 21 Randolph Road, London, W.9. at least 28 days before the A.G.M. which is due to be held on the 11th June, 1977.

Any information for the Charles Williams Society Newsletter should be sent to the Editor, Miss Xenia Howard-Johnston, 13 Princess Road, London NW1 8JR.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS

THOSE MEMBERS WHO HAVE NOT YET RENEWED THEIR SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE REMINDED TO
DO SO WITHOUT DELAY

NEW MEMBERS (April 1977)

James Brabazon, 25 Hampstead Hill Gardens, London N.W.3.

Humphrey Carpenter, 5 Polstead Road, Oxford.

Terry Duniho, The Corner-Stone Bookshop, 110 Margaret Street, Plattsburgh,
N.Y. 12901, U.S.A.

The Revd. D. D. Ostroth, 48 Yardley Court, Glen Rock, New Jersey 07452,
U.S.A.

Nancy-Lou Patterson, 115 William Street West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L1J8,
Canada.

Mr. and Mrs. W. Thomas, Garden Cottage, 27 East Street, Braunton, N. Devon.

FEBRUARY MEETING OF THE SOCIETY

In February the Charles Williams Society met to discuss Williams' literary criticism. Sue Harris led the discussion and examined Williams' The English Poetic Mind and Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind. She particularly focussed on Williams' treatment of Shakespeare's plays, showing how central Troilus and Cressida was to his development. The importance of this play is conveyed by the following statement by Williams:

"The crisis which Troilus endured is one common to all men; it is in a sense the only interior crisis worth talking about. It is that in which every nerve of the body, every consciousness of the mind, shrieks that something cannot be. Only it is ... Cressida cannot be playing with Diomed. But she is. The Queen cannot have married Claudius. But she has. Desdemona cannot love Cassio. But she does. Daughters cannot hate their father and benefactor. But they do The whole being of the victim denies the fact; the fact outrages the whole being. This is indeed change, and it was this change with which Shakespeare's genius was concerned."

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

The meetings are held at the Institute of Christian Studies, 84 Margaret Street, London W.1. on Saturdays at 2.30 p.m. Each meeting is followed by discussion and tea. The Institute is five minutes' walk from Oxford Circus underground station, up Upper Regent Street, second turning on the right, and on the right hand side near the far end.

- 23rd April, 1977: Subject: Charles Williams' novel, Many Dimensions; Richard Wallis in charge.
- 11th June, 1977: Annual General Meeting (2.30 p.m.). This will be followed by a talk, "Is Charles Williams a Contemporary?" to be given by Anne Ridler at 3.30 p.m. Members may bring guests to this talk.
- 23rd July, 1977: Subject: "The Theme of Paradise in Dante and Charles Williams"; John Allitt in charge.
- 10th September, 1977: Day conference at St. Albans (see Newsletter No. 4 for details).

15th October, 1977: Subject: "The Doctrine of Exchange, Substitution and Coinherence in Charles Williams' Work";
Kenia Howard-Johnston in charge.

Please bring copies of the books to be used at a meeting, if possible. There is no fee for members, but 50p must be paid for a guest (members can bring one guest each) and handed to the person in charge of the meeting.

MEETING OF THE S.W. LONDON GROUP

The next meeting will be held on 29th April at 7.30 p.m. at 78 King's Road, Wimbledon, London S.W.19 (01-542 1824). Subject: the two novels War in Heaven and Many Dimensions; Mrs. Tosh in charge.

LONDON READING GROUP

The following meetings have been arranged:

27th March, Sunday, at 1 p.m. in Peter and Anne Scott's house, 25 Corfton Road, Ealing, W.5. (Near Ealing Broadway station). Continuing Taliessin Through Logres. Please bring sandwiches.

22nd May, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at Charles and Alice Mary Hadfield's house, The White Cottage, 21 Randolph Road, W.9. (Near Warwick Avenue station). Continuing Taliessin through Logres. Please bring sandwiches.

2nd July, Saturday, at 7.30 p.m. in David and Dulcie Caro's house, 50 Drayton Gardens, S.W.10 (near Gloucester Road station). Continuing The Figure of Beatrice with Dante's Purgatorio.

7th August, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at Charles and Alice Mary Hadfield's (as for 22nd May).

These meetings are open to all without charge, whether or not they are members of the Society.

READING GROUPS ELSEWHERE

The Council is at present seeking someone willing to organise a reading group at Oxford. Will anyone interested in helping to form a group in their own neighbourhood, open to all, please get in touch with the General Secretaries (address on the cover).

READERS' QUERIES

John Fellow who lives at 6 Blenheim Road, St. Albans, asks:

"Has anyone identified the locus of Descent into Hell with St. Albans and a particular quarter of the City, not far from Blenheim Road? As seen from the outside. (As regards the character of the little community - he wouldn't in his earlier days have any contact with it.)"

QUIZ RESULT

The winner of the quiz in the Winter Newsletter is Anne Marshall from Rhode Island, U.S.A., with 19½ out of a possible 23. A cheque for £1 has been sent to her. It was fascinating to read the answers, and I'm sure it was fascinating to concoct them. (Alice Mary Hadfield).

CORRECTION

Jo Harris who contributed the last "Charles Williams As I Knew Him" (Newsletter No. 4) would like to apologise for an error: the MS of War in Heaven was sent to Victor Gollancz, not Michael Joseph.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

by Martin Moynihan

As a novelist Charles Williams provokes strong reactions. Some read everything he wrote. Others simply can't stand him.

A good point to start is to read Many Dimensions: "The way to the Stone is in the Stone" ... What is going to happen next? is your thought during a first reading (and it is a fascinating tale: or by now you may have to put it aside for good). Then, but what does it mean? Then, of course, that is what it means - but we have heard it so often before and in such hackneyed (or such hallowed) language that the meaning has worn off. And so, from time to time, you will return to Many Dimensions because, even when you have understood it, it still has the power to invigorate and refresh.

No doubt you will look out for the other novels too: The Greater Trumps, The Place of the Lion, War in Heaven, Descent into Hell, Shadows of Ecstasy and All Hallows Eve. In all of them there is a great charity, and a great accuracy. It is impossible not to be disturbed by Charles Williams. Are you really being fair to your parents? Or to your friends? Or to the facts? It may be a momentary but a salutary check. Or it may be the spectacle of the historian in Descent into Hell, slightly but finally turning away from the truth.

But there is also the truth of charity - of things seen in the light of what they could become or of all that has gone to their making. Charles Williams points to a policeman's cloaked and out-stretched arm (The Greater Trumps) and you see Caesar and the majesty of Rome and Byzantium. More than that, he creates characters who see in this way, who have this second sight. They are in love and charity and they see their neighbours, whether things or people, accordingly.

Not all his characters do. Williams does not exclude evil. Does he, indeed, make it too sensational? But we are apt to forget what real hostility to good there can be, below the surface. "Pray" says the Archdeacon in War in Heaven, as the Cup begins to disintegrate, "Pray, in the name of God. They are praying against Him tonight".

A favourite type in the novels is that of the genuine agnostic, like the Lord Chief Justice in Many Dimensions; one who is as far from disbelief as he is from belief. Detachment is part of the way, whatever its origin. Irony and a sense of 'the excellent absurdity of things' can be the companion of courtesy. And in the pages of Charles Williams the agnostic moves towards mysticism.

The paradoxical and the unexpected are never far away. There is no blurring of black and white, but they turn up in unlikely places - as when Lester (All Hallows Eve), for not disengaging her wrist too suddenly from an unwanted taxi companion (who has however just given her a good dinner), is credited with an act of pure courtesy and one which is to stand her in good stead later.

Charles Williams described himself as a romantic theologian, one who studied the theological significance of the fact of love (see C. S. Lewis' Preface to Essays Presented to Charles Williams). And he is very good on the turns

of a love affair or a marriage. The conversation of his lovers, it must be admitted, is often impossibly unreal. But the portrayal of mood and feeling more than makes up for this.

The novels blend splendour and horror; and not least *Shadows of Ecstasy*, with London invaded from Africa. There you see the love of life and power gone wrong, but with no blinking of their true and rightful appeal. It is not enough to look at the worst. We must look at the worst at its best. And it may be a shadow of the truth.

Lastly, there is joy. In one of his poems is the line, "There was no capable song for the joy in me". And the novels show joy, both momentarily and, despite all grief, contradiction and defeat, as a prevailing quality. Damaris Tighe's father, whose hobby is collecting butterflies (*The Place of the Lion*), sees the Idea of the Butterfly - "I always knew they were real" - and enters into joy. It was, perhaps, an inferior joy but it was according to the measure of his search. Then there is that magnificent description of the Unicorn sustaining itself in joy among the worshippers at an evening communion. What is it but joy which is diffused through the characters of Aunt Sybil or the Archdeacon or Peter Stanhope?

If you like the novels you will want to go on to the biographies and the criticism, to the plays and the poems. But that is another story.

Charles Williams died (and some like to keep the anniversary) on the 15th May, 1945. He was 58.

CHARLES WILLIAMS IN THE TWENTIES

By John Pellow

It began in 1920 with a letter of thanks for an appreciative notice of Divorce in an obscure monthly signed by one whose poems had appeared in Georgian Poetry and the London Mercury. No doubt it was unusual to write to a reviewer, he remarked; as unusual, I thought, to open the door with quite that flourish and ceremonial bow, even to a writer of verses. But at the top of that dizzy staircase, with a tall window opening on London at every floor, it was explained, once I had been introduced to the "duchessly" presence of Michâl, that he had been lifted by my words from a mood of depression. Divorce was being ignored as much as Poems of Conformity a few years earlier. Only the dead (Alice Meynell and Raleigh) and the dying (Bridges) admired him. But here was a contemporary who regarded him as an "important" poet. From the torrent of talk that followed it emerged that we shared certain tastes and interests: Patmore, the Arthurian myth (from different angles), and even theology, a rare thing in the early '20s. And a relish for nonsense.

Visits were exchanged. Our wives kissed and went into conclave on young-wifely matters; they became fast friends; in her widowhood Michâl was to recall repeatedly that my wife was "among the Beatitudes".

When Michael made a reluctant entry into the world about two years later he was equally reluctant to settle down at nights. He had to be brought, complaining, from his bed, and C.W. walked up and down chanting long passages of Milton, which the babe "wouldn't have at any price". His father's own verse wasn't much more acceptable. He wrote: "I don't altogether trust his literary judgement".

All this made conversation difficult. House-visits were supplemented by lunches in Newgate Street, from which we would adjourn to the little book-crammed room which C.W. shared with Frederick Page in Amen House. I attended

a rehearsal of the Masque of Perusal, the most memorable moment being the conclusion and the sweeping genuflection with which he addressed the empty throne: "Caesar, remember, thou shalt die".

The reception of Windows of Night was no more encouraging than that of its predecessors, and he was already turning to prose. In 1924 he was writing that "honey of a book", as Mary Shideler was to call it later, Outlines of Romantic Theology. He and I discussed it in some detail. But it frightened Milford, who consulted Bishop T. B. Strong, not the most suitable of referees. (He was reputed to be a misogynist.) What the Bishop said was never disclosed, to C.W.'s intense annoyance. While the book was going the rounds of the publishers (Nonesuch, Faber and Gwyn, the Ditchling Press) he was engaged on two "thrillers", The Black Bastard and The Corpse. From time to time he would report to me the progress of the action. After four years The Corpse (renamed War in Heaven) broke the ice, but The B.B. (now Shadows of Ecstasy) had to wait another three years, until the publication of three more novels had established his reputation as a writer of a new kind of thriller.

In the '30s our communications dwindled. The list of his publications during this decade is sufficient explanation of this: the novels, the plans, the works of criticism, the biographies, characteristically, mostly of unattractive people like Henry VII, James the First, Bacon, the drudgery of reviewing detective fiction, all on top of the lecturing.

The shaky handwriting of the single letter I received from him confirms the reason for his silence - overwork and its penalty. But he did not mention the operation, and the warmth of his friendship was unabated.

I last spoke to him, on the telephone, in December 1938, to arrange a meeting with George Every who happened to be spending a couple of nights with me.

When the war came I was evacuated to Blackpool and he to Oxford, "this provincial centre". I sent these lines to him, but whether they reached him in that snow-bound month of January 1940 I do not know.

By Folly or by Fate exiled
To Oxford you and I to Fylde,
Each boasts a Tower but you, I fear
Have neither Pleasure Beach nor Pier.
Of Piers at Blackpool we have three.
How very comforting to me
Who, none the less, perversely sigh
For Blackwells, Bodley and the High.
Torn ruthless from our kindly roots
In Metropolitan clay what fruits
Can Exiles grow in alien fields,
Or Pontus and Ravenna yield?
From Isis and from you may be
Expected a new Comedy;
In Ultima Philistia
I can but write my Tristia.

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