

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

NO. 6, SUMMER, 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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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

On the 11th June the first A.G.M. of the Society was held at the Institute of Christian Studies, 84 Margaret Street, London, W.1.

The Chairman, Richard Wallis, opened the meeting at 2.30 p.m. and welcomed those members who were able to come. Mrs. Alice Mary Hadfield, General Secretary, reported on the Society's activities since its foundation and suggested ways in which the Society might develop. The Treasurer, Philip Bovey, then presented the Society's accounts. The Newsletter's Editor, Xenia Howard-Johnston, presented a report on the Newsletter which was followed by suggestions from members about the kind of material which they wished to see printed in future. Three members of the Society were elected to the Council: Dr. Brian Horne, Miss Sue Harris, Mr. Martin Moynihan.

The Society was pleased to welcome Mrs. Anne Ridler, who at 3.30 p.m. gave a talk on the subject, "Is Charles Williams a Contemporary?" The text of this talk is reproduced below.

"Is Charles Williams a Contemporary?"

You may think that, my sympathies lying where they do, this title is like a sentence containing Nonne, expecting the answer Yes. And you will, of course, be right. At any rate, talking to an audience such as this, I can be sure that the deeper reasons for the affirmative will be understood. But let us imagine, not such a sympathetic listener, but an intelligent reader who has tried C.W. and found him irrelevant to his needs. How should we answer his objections, and what ground should we choose to stand on, for our major defence?

I assume first, that the arguments we have to counter are not so broad-reaching as to amount to an attack on the tenets of Christianity; it is no part of my scope to defend those. Nor must the arguments be so narrow as to depend on the trivialities of passing fashion. For in looking for what is truly contemporary, one must be careful not to confuse fashion with true relevance: Helen Gardner pointed this out in her assessment of Eliot's comedies, their form driven temporarily out of favour by the popular kitchen-sink type of drama. C.W.'s frame of reference in his earlier poems and closet-dramas (now a dead form) assumes a familiarity with Anglo-Catholic practices and terminology which is a barrier to those of another generation and type of upbringing. This does not necessarily mean that the poems cannot speak to our condition, if we are willing to go to meet them. And some of those early works do not even present such a barrier of mannerism, and are startling in their anticipation of contemporary thought. Take their attitude to the conception of justice, for instance, which is closer to Lear than to the penal code. Or take the sonnet on "Prisoners in Windows of Night" where C.W. expresses not only an imaginative sympathy with the lot of a captive, but suggests that society shuts the criminal away not for punishment, not even for justice' sake, but for fear of its own otherwise uncontrollable predatory desires.

Mary Shideler, in her book on C.W.'s Theology of Romantic Love, has stressed the fact that his work is not as widely known as it should be because "he dealt in images, during a time when the art of comprehending imagery was almost unknown." If that is still true, and it is the kind of statement that is difficult either to accept or refute (or anyhow I am not able to do so), then it might seem to imply that the work cannot speak to contemporaries, because it does not employ ways of communication which can be understood. Certainly C.W. would not turn aside to explain his terms, to a reader who found them incomprehensible - and he steadfastly refused to supply Notes to the Taliessin cycle. But every major writer creates the taste by which he is understood and enjoyed. Whatever may

have been true in C.W.'s lifetime, surely now, more than a quarter of a century later, this should have happened. Enough people have read and valued his novels to pass through that gate to the more difficult country beyond. His world is so comprehensive and coherent, that it only requires an alert attention, an expenditure of pains, to become a source of power, in a dark age such as ours. But attention and pains it does require, such as we should give to any complex author of the past, before we can make his ideas our own.

Mrs. Shideler considers that C.W.'s exposition of the Way of Affirmation of Images is his "major contribution to the great stream of Christian thought." And I decided, as I considered what ground to choose for the stand against our imaginary objector, that it must certainly be C.W.'s sacramentalism, the grand principle of that Way. This, which underlies all his writing from first to last, is what especially speaks to our need; this can help us to keep our balance, amid the violent changes of the time and reconcile us to "the common agony of our lives" (in C.W.'s own phrase). As Traherne put it: "We should be all Life and Mettle and Vigor and Love to everything. And that would Poys us." In C.W.'s emphasis on the holiness of the human body, the goodness of the material world, he was not only truly orthodox, but was years ahead of the Church of his time - at any rate in its common emphasis. He understood the importance of D. H. Lawrence, while most Christians distrusted him - he would certainly have made an eloquent witness at the Lady Chatterley trial. Here is part of what he had to say about Lawrence and the Church:

"The Church owes more to heretics than she is ever likely (on this earth) to admit; her gratitude is always slightly patronising. There existed, in the early part of the 20th Century, a convinced and rhetorical heretic named David Herbert Lawrence. Of what exactly he was convinced, it is not always easy to be sure, except on the very broadest lines. He thought that sex was important; he thought physical nature significant; he thought modern industrialism disgusting ... Lawrence was a heretic - good, but he was concerned with a Christian orthodoxy - the orthodoxy of the blood of Man.

The operations of matter [as C.W. observes earlier in the essay] are a means of the operation of Christ, and the body has not, in fact, as some pious people suggest, fallen a good deal farther than the soul. This is all elementary enough; it is implicit or explicit in all the rites and all the rituals. It remains, however, that the help which the body gives to the soul has been far less seriously examined than the help which the soul gives to the body. The dichotomy which orthodoxy turned out of its official dogma has continually returned in its unofficial language ... The Way of the Rejection of Images has been far more considered throughout Christendom than the Way of Affirmation of Images - unless, indeed, those images were of the accepted religious kind. Yet the two ways have the same maxim and the same aim - 'to love everything because God loves it'."

If the Church of C.W.'s time had, as he said, fed morals to the hungry sheep, instead of "the profound metaphysics of the awful and redeeming body", the temper of the time has now changed so sharply, the mysteries of sex have so burst out of the bottom of Pandora's television-box, that the Church itself is of necessity affected, and its position is rather different from that criticised by C.W. I do not think he would need to alter a line of what he wrote, if he were alive today; it is all as true and needful as ever it was; but I think he might place his point of equilibrium rather differently. He might feel that while Christians are not in so much danger of over-spiritualizing as they were, the world is giving the body's sexual nature maybe more than its due share of attention; that those who (in Eliot's memorable phrase) think of the sexual act as analogous to the operation of Kruschen salts are

now in the ascendant, and that there is something decadent about this need for public display and analysis, as of those who "excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled, with pungent sauces."

All the more reason, then, to turn to the doctrines of love which are at the heart of C.W.'s teaching; all the more reason to see that he speaks to present need, just as much as when he expounded Wordsworth's lines on the human body, to him "an index of delight, Of grace and honour, power and worthiness." For it was, and is, the grace, power and worthiness, as much as the delight, that is to be studied, and whoever limits the delight to its transient, immediate, results, is cheating himself. And whoever treats the beloved person as a means of self-gratification will end up feeling nothing at all, like Wentworth in Descent Into Hell. For as Aquinas said, "Love is simply the willing of good. To love a person is to wish that person good." Never did C.W. forget, or allow his pupils to forget, the glory for which we were made, and which for most of mankind is seen most clearly when we fall in love. And our vocation is, as he wrote, "a thing not of superstition and indulgence, but of doctrine and duty; not of achievement, but of promise." "Look well", he exhorts us in the words of Beatrice to Dante, "I am Beatrice indeed": that is, a unique person, and an image of God.

Another area of thought in which, one could say, Christians have caught up with C.W. many years later, is in the treatment of fruitful scepticism. The favourite aphorism which he used to express the need for sceptical detachment, "This also is Thou, neither is this Thou", he amplifies thus: "Unless devotion is given to a thing which must prove false in the end, the thing that is true in the end cannot enter ... There is nothing that matters, of which it is not sometimes desirable to feel: 'this does not matter'." Freedom to disbelieve is important both for the sake of honesty and for the sake of energy - the energy for definition and discovery that this freedom awakens. But the theologians of C.W.'s day did not take disbelief seriously enough, he thought. As he said in a lecture of 1939:

"My chief objection to the champions of Christianity is that the objections to Christianity do not come from them. You may really sympathise with the other fellow, but you never sound as if you really felt the force of his arguments ... Why should the objections to Christianity be left to outsiders? Let us see them, see where they are, feel them, almost create them: and then we may have the energy that belongs to Christianity ... It is a very doubtful thing whether in fact either the Divine City itself, or that pale and feeble image of it about which we dream, can function and thrive except by in some sense including its opposite."

Years later, a group of Christian thinkers took him at his word, as it were, and published a symposium called Objections to Christian Belief. But would he now perhaps think that the Church has become so adept at defining its own relativity, at expatiating on its own precariousness, that it sometimes looks like a man sawing away the branch he sits on? I wondered, as I read the recent doctrinal symposium called Christian Believing, what he would have said of it, if he could have reviewed it. No doubt he would have found a good deal to praise; and the doubts raised as to whether there is any irreducible minimum of truth in the New Testament records would not have disturbed him. These, indeed, had been raised in his day: glancing at them, he accepted the possibility that the events in St. Mark's Gospel had not yet happened, but pointed out that "if time and place are wrong, they are at least all that can be wrong" - meaning, I think, that if Christianity had no connection with history, it would be a different religion altogether. But he held that Christ's life taken as a set of precepts for our living was less important than his atoning sacrifice, his coming "to turn the world back." So no iconoclastic approach to the New Testament could startle him,

and I think he would have relished the harsh, almost violent figure of Christ shown in Pasolini's film of St. Matthew's Gospel, even while agreeing that it did not represent the whole truth about Jesus. But read C.W.'s own account of the Divine Thing, in his account of St. Mark's Gospel in He Came Down From Heaven.

To pursue the question of historical fact - the relationship between myth and history did not, I think, present any difficulties to him. One of my first recollections of him is of hearing him say emphatically, as he stood in the doorway of a Somerset cottage, "Effective as the myths of the New Testament are ...", and I goggled, for to me then (aged 18), to call something a myth meant that you did not think it true. Such naivete was not uncommon. Humphrey Carpenter in his Life of J. R. R. Tolkien describes a crucial conversation between C. W. Lewis and Tolkien, before Lewis became a Christian. "Myths", said Lewis in a striking phrase, "are lies, even though lies breathed through silver." It was as though Lewis could not accept that a historical figure could have the richness and complexity that belong to myth, which is the product of many imaginations. But for C.W., accustomed to express the deeper truths of his own life and relationships in the form of myth, such opposition would be simply irrelevant. "The thing", he wrote, "as it happens on the earth and in the world, the thing as it happens on the earth and in the soul, are two stresses on one fact; say, on one Word."

I have not yet spoken of C.W.'s doctrine of Exchange, or Substituted Love, which is of course directly connected with his exploration of the Affirmative Way. This, with its stress on the interdependence of all human beings - "Your life and your death are with your neighbour" - seems to me to be very much in accord with the spirit of the age - of the young in especial. In their concern for the mental and physical suffering of others, the young seem to me to be far superior to my generation (if one can generalise). And in that concern, rather than in allegiance to an institution or addiction to liturgy, they should find C.W. sympathetic. I have certainly found it happen so, when I have tried to suggest the practical possibility of taking over pain or anxiety from other people. But the medium in which these ideas are expressed - whether in the theological writings or in the novels - can be a barrier: in the theology, the language really has to be learnt before the ideas can be understood; in the novels, the detective-story form, and the chattiness of the dialogue, sometimes prevents them from being taken seriously. It is a question of language: conversely, I am sure that C.W. would have no sympathy with the comparative chattiness of our modernised liturgical language - the removal of mystery. Yet he would surely be delighted that the Parish Communion has now become the main Sunday service in the majority of churches in the Church of England; and that the congregation has been given a more vocal part, in that one-sided conversation which is, as he said, our liturgy.

Lastly: C.W. lived in an age of anxiety, as we do; he lived through two wars, though he did not live to know of the explosion of the first atomic bomb. Taliessin speaks to us out of crisis - the wars in Logres, the Moslem invasions and the break-up of the Empire, the overthrow of the Table. And as the Pope, "rich in loss" on our behalf, prays on our behalf, we see that all is well - is well, not only shall be well.

"Jupiter rode over Carbonek; beyond Jupiter,
beyond the summer stars, deep heaven
centrally opened within the land of the Trinity;
planetary light was absorbed there, and emerged
again in its blissful journeys; there the three
lords of the quest landed from the vessel of the quest,
Bors, Percivale, and Galahad the High Prince -
the chief of the images, and the contemplation of the images,
and the work of the images in all degrees of the world ..."

"... consuls and lords within the Empire,
for all the darkening of the Empire and the loss of Logres
and the hiding of the High Prince, felt the Empire
revive in a live hope of the Sacred City."

So, to an objector who found C.W. irrelevant, I have tried to show that in what concerns man's deepest needs - his relation to God and his neighbour, he has much to say to us, and any impression to the contrary is likely to be a question of terminology. On social questions, his teaching can only be indirect; but the figure of Bors, and what he has to say about money, the "medium of exchange" is there to make the connection.

Discussion

Although Mrs. Ridler was assuming that the answer to the question posed in the title of her talk would be "yes", she nevertheless provided a context for us to face squarely the fact that many people do not "find" Charles Williams. Or, if they do, they do not necessarily find him completely satisfying or relevant.

The discussion which followed the talk ranged widely. Some people commented on the complexity of Williams' symbolic language, which very often discouraged the novice from persevering in the reading of his work. Others pointed to the fact that alongside some of his contemporaries - T. S. Eliot for example - Williams did lose in the comparison. It was also noted that in pursuing his private and Catholic vision of life, Williams refused to limit himself to merely one discipline: theology, literary criticism, poetry. As a result, he is often dismissed by both theologian and literary critic as someone who is not seriously committed, not really "one of them".

One of the reasons why Charles Williams seems to go unread today is due to the fact that many of his books are unavailable. We agreed that we should write to publishers and encourage reprinting. It was noted with some amusement and concern that his relevance seems to be acknowledged by the occultist publisher, Dennis Wheatley, who has recently brought out some of the novels.

Many of us felt that Charles Williams was still more a "pioneer" than a "contemporary". The relationship between spirit and matter, it was noted, was more precisely explored by Williams than it has been by the Church as yet; his appreciation of the Eastern Orthodox tradition was stressed by some members present.

Sue Harris

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 July, 1977: John Allitt was to have spoken at this meeting but has had to put off his talk until a later date. John Heath-Stubbs has kindly agreed to speak on "The Figure of Merlin in the Work of Charles Williams and Others."

10th September, 1977: Day conference at St. Albans (see below).

15th October, 1977: Subject: "The Doctrine of Exchange, Substitution and Coinherence in Charles Williams' Work"; Xenia 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 13th October at 7 p.m. for 7.30. Please contact Martin Moynihan, 5 The Green, Wimbledon, London SW19 5AZ (01-946 7964) for meeting place.

LONDON READING GROUP

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

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

2nd October, Saturday, at 7.30 p.m. in David and Dulcie Caro's house (see above).

29th October, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at Charles and Alice Mary Hadfield's house (as above).

ST. ALBANS DAY-CONFERENCE: SATURDAY 10TH SEPTEMBER

Details of this conference will be sent to all members of the Society in Britain. This advance note is for the benefit of any of our overseas members who may happen to be in England then, and would like to come. When they get here, would they please write or telephone Charles or Alice Mary Hadfield, The White Cottage, 21 Randolph Road, London W9 1AN (01-286 4347) for particulars?

We shall meet at St. Albans - where C.W. lived from the age of eight until he was 30 - in mid-morning (frequent trains from London St. Pancras take between 20 and 30 minutes) to visit C.W.'s old school and to be taken over the Abbey where he worshipped. Then lunch - we shall ask members to bring sandwiches, but they will be able to buy wine and coffee.

After lunch from 2 - 4 p.m., there will be:

- (a) a talk by our lively member John Fellow, who in 1920 was the first reviewer to recognise C.W. as a poet, and who remained a friend all C.W.'s life.
- (b) a reading of C.W.'s play The Death of Good Fortune, organised from among those present by Hilda Pallan.
- (c) readings from C.W.'s early books of poems which were written while he lived at St. Albans, or which were associated with it.

There will be no conference charge, but when we send out the notice we shall ask members to tell us whether they hope to be present so that we can organise refreshments and the morning visits.

QUIZ (SEE NEWSLETTER NO. 4)

1. Many Dimensions, ch.xiv, 'The Second Refusal of Chloe Burnet,' p.256.
Chloe Burnett, during the attempt of Prince Ali to take the type of the Stone of Suleiman from her in bed at night.
2. All Hallows' Eve, ch.iv, 'The Dream', p.66.
London, within the eternal City.
3. Descent into Hell, ch.v, 'Return to Eden', p.115.
Behind the wooden door of the shed by the cemetery. Lawrence Wentworth.
4. The Place of the Lion, ch.xiii, 'The Burning House', p. 216.
Anthony Durrant.
5. The Greater Trumps, ch.ii, 'The Hermit', p.35.
The image of the Fool in the centre of the dance.
6. Shadows of Ecstasy, ch.iv, 'The Majesty of the King', p.70.
Philip Travers, in the movement of Rosamond's arm.
7. War in Heaven, ch.viii, 'Fardles', pp.117-120.
Sir Giles Tumulty. Because the likely whereabouts of the Grail was given in a paragraph in the proofs of Sir Giles's book, Sacred Vessels in Folklore, and this paragraph Sir Giles cut out of the proofs before they went to the printer. But the Archdeacon had been allowed previously to read the proofs in the office, and so realised that the place suggested was his own parish church.
8. Shadows of Ecstasy, ch.v, The Neophyte of Death.
The Place of the Lion, ch.ii, The Eidola and the Angeli.
All Hallows' Eve, ch.v, The Hall by Holborn.
All Hallows' Eve, ch.ix, Telephone Conversations.
Descent into Hell, ch.iii, Quest of Hell.
The Greater Trumps, ch.iv, The Chariot.
Many Dimensions, ch.v, The Loss of a Type.

C.W. SOCIETY NEWS

New Members (July 1977)

Mrs. Alzina Stone Dale, 5548 S. Kenwood Ave., Chicago, 111.60637, U.S.A.

Robert B. Ives, Messiah College, PA 17027, U.S.A.

John and Caitlin Matthews, 3/26 Redcliffe Gardens, London S.W.10.

Miss Brenda Rushton, 69 Salisbury Avenue, St. Alban's.

Taliessin Endpaper

With the kind permission of Lynton Lamb, the artist, and of the Oxford University Press, the Society has reprinted the endpaper which was used in early editions of Taliessin through Logres. This shows the human body superimposed upon a sketch map of Europe and part of Asia, to illustrate the poems.

The reprint is in black, with a margin and explanatory sentences. These can be trimmed away to the size necessary to paste it into later editions of Taliessin through Logres. Price, 50p post free or two ordered together for 85p for members at home and abroad, assuming despatch by sea mail when necessary. We are, however, trying to arrange for one of our United States members to handle American sales, and therefore our American members may like to wait until the next Newsletter, when we shall hope to give particulars.

Orders to: Charles Hadfield, The White Cottage, 21 Randolph Road, London W9 1AN.

Miss Edith Williams

Members will be glad to know that our life member, Miss Edith Williams, Charles's sister, is now out of hospital and back home after her recent fall. She has been sent the Society's best wishes.

Play Produced

An American correspondent who has asked to join the Society, Susan Jonas, writes that she has directed a performance of The House by the Stable in her church at Havertown, Pennsylvania.

CHARLES WILLIAMS AS I KNEW HIM

Thelma Shuttleworth

It is easier for me to "cram today with eternity" than to cram into seven hundred and fifty revealing words the knowledge of Charles Williams gained in eighteen years of heavenly friendship with him. To try to express the essence of that spirit, so rare, so joyous, so entirely archangelical, is as absurd as to suppose that one could capture, and pin to a school board, his master butterfly from The Place of the Lion. However, since the task has been undertaken, "let the excellent absurdity hold".

In his 40th September, my 24th, Charles Williams exploded into my life without warning. A group of assorted females (I was a teacher and taking a diploma course) were sitting with expectation in the air - and hope! Yet another University Extension Lecturer was to give us the benefit of his views on English Literature beginning with Shakespeare.

There was a sudden irruption into our midst of a burning presence, which proceeded to put on a brilliant, bravura performance, in an unbelievable accent, that left us stunned. It was obvious that it simply would not do. As, however, the subsequent discussion electrified us into believing that we were a group of most interesting, clever people, we felt, after all, that it might do. It went on doing happily, week after uneventful week (it was the event of the week), for years. When my diploma course classes were changed and clashed with his lectures, I used to race out from school, catch a train and get panting to Amen House as he came out at 5.30, so that we could have tea and talk till the class at 7.30. Or I might manage a quick lunch hour.

How to convey my personal relationship with Charles, however, I cannot tell.

From the beginning we were together in love, though never with one another. He was married, I engaged to be. We talked of love, worked at love, suffered much for love. Sex did not concern us, except academically. Being in love was, for me, a heavenly state, its physical implications negligible, or, as

one might say, left to be called for. Fortunately, for my fortunately unique young man, Charles set the whole thing neatly for me in a sonnet Of Love, and that was that and still is. No: there must have been questions later, for I find these words in a letter from Oxford during the war. "Sex is a nuisance because it is so great, because our vision through it is so great. It is the means of the greatest proportion, therefore of the greatest disproportion. A nuisance, but not important: only our soul's assent is that."

An explanation of our rapport may well have been that in a similarly cloistered upbringing (I was in a Church of England orphanage for ten years) we had found our friends among books, our way of life in Christianity. (It is true that before I met Charles I had already eschewed all forms of religion and have never returned to one; and though I do think this somewhat presumptuous, I still do not see that it can be helped.) Anyway, the fact remains that both of us in our time "on honey-dew had fed, and drunk the milk of paradise."

Our interchange was free and equal, living each others' lives, dying each others' deaths, carrying each others' burdens. But he was strict; determined that anything he could do to save my soul alive he would do without fear or favour. Fervently I enjoyed such open and complete communication. I told all. I was punished! What penalties! I learnt swathes of Paradise Lost. I wrote lines - "I am a foul blot. But I am a child a lucidity - "several times on a postcard, "and put it in the post and that will cost you 1½d and serve you right". (Oh Charles! How would you have coped with today's postal system!)

Denizens of the heavenly city, we moved in eternity under the shadow of St. Paul's in the earthly city, as simply as Betty did in All Hallows' Eve. The funny thing is that though there was no regularity, whether once a month or a week, our table at Hill's

seemed always free for us; the only regular thing was that I invariably went home walking on air. It never seemed to rain. And if the trains on which we travelled to our different classes were packed with home-going citizens all too conscious of time and place, Charles still called the length of the carriage to me in carrying tones, "God bless you, child. Under the Protection", leaving me blushing cowardly under the gaze of alien eyes; and mostly without a ticket, bless him.

The other day I was agonizing over his predicament, so movingly set forth in the Death of Virgil, when it resolved itself. He finished the poem, didn't he, so he knew that all was well.

"Virgil was fathered of his friends.
He lived in their ends.
He was set on the marble of exchange."