

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

NO. 8, WINTER, 1977

CHARLES WILLIAMS AS I KNEW HIM

by E. L. Mascall

Charles Williams, novelist, poet, dramatist and brilliant lay theologian, who died, suddenly, at a comparatively early age in 1945, was one of the most invigorating and stimulating men that it has been my good fortune ever to encounter. We met on a number of occasions in the 1930s, usually at gatherings of the Christendom Group, that remarkable society of sociologically orientated Anglicans which included in various degrees of attachment such outstanding laypeople as Maurice Reckitt, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, Ruth Kenyon, Donald Mackinnon and Hugo Dyson. A conversation between Williams and Reckitt was as entertaining a display of spontaneous wit and wisdom as I have experienced.

Physically, Williams was not particularly impressive until one noticed the vivacity of his facial expression. He was rather below middle height and peered through rather thick glasses. It was in the excitability and volubility of his speech that his enormous interior energy and enthusiasm were manifested and became infectious. Though largely self-educated, he was a man of profound intellectual depth and, with this, of great spiritual integrity. With the emotional temperament of a Welshman and the accent and sense of humour of a cockney, the impression which an audience received from him on their first meeting could begin with a kind of stunned incredulity, which rapidly passed into wild enthusiasm. I vividly remember the effect which he produced on the students of Lincoln Theological College by reciting the opening lines of Milton's Paradise Lost:

Of man's first disobedience an' the fruit.
Of that forbidden tree, 'ose mortal tiste
Brort death into the world and all our wow...
Sing, 'eavenly muse, that on the sicred top...

—which was probably much more like Milton's own pronunciation than the etiolated accents of our modern academics.

Most readers of Williams easily recognise how deeply concerned he was to emphasise the goodness and authenticity of the physical, including the sexual, aspect of human existence and human nature, "the holy and glorious flesh" as he sometimes described it. What they do not always understand is that, with all the exuberance with which he would extol the glories of romantic love, he was firmly and no less exuberantly committed to the great traditional Christian values of chastity, fidelity and monogamy. C. S. Lewis describes in one of his letters the impact made by a lecture of Williams's on Milton's Comus:

We actually heard a lecture on Comus which put the importance where Milton put it. In fact the lecture was a panegyric of chastity. Just imagine the incredulity with which (at first) an audience of undergraduates listened to something so unheard of. But he beat them in the end.

He is an ugly man with rather a cockney voice. But no one ever thinks of this for five minutes after he has begun speaking. His face becomes almost angelic. Both in public and in private he is of nearly all the men I have met, the one whose address most overflows with love. It is simply irresistible. These young men and women were lapping up what he said about Chastity before the end of the hour. It's a big thing to have done. (Letters of C. S. Lewis, p. 196.)

Nevertheless, with all his enthusiasm for the romantic nature of married love, Williams made no pretence of glossing over the more banal aspects of domesticity. I remember him describing how he used to make early-morning tea for his

wife. "I usually really enjoy doing it. But there are times when there's nothing that I feel I want to do less. And then I say to myself, 'Well, dash it all, I am married to the woman!' And then I get up and make it."

It would be quite wrong to suppose that with his intense aesthetic sensibility Williams was inclined to underrate the importance of the rational and intellectual aspect of human experience. He once arrived rather late at a meeting at which I was speaking, I entirely forgot about what topic. But in the discussion after my speech he mentioned that he had just come from Fleet Street, where everyone seemed to be living in a world of false values. "I've just seen a poster saying 'Tragic Death of a Peer'. Just fancy that - what is there tragic about the death of a peer? And then, when I came into this room I heard Father Mascall saying 'What is really important is to be careful how we define our terms.' And my heart leapt up when I beheld a rainbow in the sky!"

At the expense of being outrageously egoistic I will dare to illustrate this same point from a review which Williams wrote in 1943 of my first serious theological work He Who Is in the now defunct journal Time and Tide. He began by saying that in writing on philosophical theology I had confirmed the line in Comus where the Elder Brother says that philosophy is

a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets
Where no crude surfeit reigns.

and then continued:

This is supposed to be a simile of intellectual satisfaction. So it is, but it is also a perfectly correct literal statement. There was a moment in He Who Is when I found myself savouring a particular doctrine with an almost physical delight; and, except from false fear, I do not know why I say almost. It was in my mouth "sweet as honey"; it melted exquisitely into my corporeal organism and bestowed a richness. Perhaps the apocalyptic John also was talking more sense than we know when he spoke of "eating a book". It would be humbling if we discovered that the saints and prophets were physiologically as well as psychologically accurate. The physical effect of intellectual ideas has still to be examined by psycho-analysts and doctors. We shall yet perhaps see graphs showing the relative effects on a fifty-years-old one-legged west-country industrialist of the Platonic Ideas, the Cartesian dualism and the geo-politics of Haushofer.

No doubt it will come as a surprise to some that "the particular doctrine in question was that of the self-sufficiency of God", even when he added that "one's physical reactions have nothing to do - at least, calculably - with the truth of the doctrine, nor was the doctrine new", but I have quoted this passage in order to show how very organically in Williams's view of reality the intellectual and the aesthetic were mutually integrated. Indeed I think that one of the reasons for Williams's concern with the language of poetry was that it seemed to him that aesthetic images were often more successful than conceptual forms in expressing the depth and multiplicity of the real world. I once very daringly asked him whether the line, in one of the Taliessin poems, "the feet of creation walk backward through the waters" was meant as a description of the effects of sin and the Fall. With characteristic humility he replied after a moment's thought, "I have never thought of that before, but that is certainly one of the things that it means". Paradoxical and even frivolous as this answer might seem to some, there could hardly be a clearer spontaneous avowal that the poet's function is not to give expression to the dredged-up precipitates of his own subconscious but to witness to his imperfect but nevertheless authentic perceptions of the manifold aspects of objective reality.

But this is not the place for a discussion of Williams's theology, fascinating as that topic would be.

One last recollection; I cannot recall the context of this incident but it is entirely characteristic and I tell it as I remember it. Williams told us that he had been having his hair cut and the barber had told him that he (the barber) had just got engaged to be married. "He said to me, 'Yer know, sir, it just makes yer feel fine. I felt that if a bloke 'ad dotted me in the eye I'd 'ave stood 'im a pint.' I leapt out of the chair and seized him by the hand and said, 'My friend, do you know that's just what Dante said in the Vita Nuova: "Such warmth of charity came upon me that most certainly in that moment if anyone had done me an injury I would have forgiven him."?'." What effect this produced upon the other occupants of the barber's saloon Williams did not tell us; I imagine that to him his reaction seemed the most natural thing in the world. For if there was ever a Christian to whom it seemed obvious that grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, that Christian was Charles Williams.

In these days when for so many professional theologians the fundamental theological criterion appears to be that of drabness, it is comforting to remember the life and work of this inspired and inspiring layman.

REVIEW

John Heath-Stubbs: Selected Poems, O.U.P. Paperback.

John Heath-Stubbs: Artorius, Enitharmon Press, London, 1974.

"We have forgotten the old high Modes of loving." (An Heroic Epistle)

"Yet a Public House perhaps makes manifest also
The hidden City; implies its laws
Of tolerance, hierarchy, exchange." (Lament for The Old Swan, Notting Hill Gate)

"Infinite Godhead circumscribed, hangs helpless at the breast." (For the Nativity)

"But poetry is not 'emotional truth'.
The emotions have much less to do with the business
Than is commonly supposed. No more than the intellect.
The intellect shapes, the emotions feed the poem,
Whose roots are in the senses, whose flower is imagination." (Ars Poetica)

These lines, taken from four poems in John Heath-Stubbs' own Selection from his poems over 30 years, show a feeling relationship to Charles Williams's verse. Quotations 1 and 3 recall the early verse of Poems of Conformity and Divorce; 2 relates to "The Departure of Dindrane" and to "The Founding of the Company" in The Region of the Summer Stars; 4 recalls "Taliessin in the School of the Poets" and "The Coming of Palomides" in Taliessin Through Logres.

The selection is refreshing, being intelligible, not blinkered with ideologies, exploring deeply the experiences of human beings and the range of imagination, never shallow or narky. He does not flee from suffering into protest or hate; he feels the wonder of the visible world, the burning of man's heart, the inviolable existence of another individual than himself, and the excellence glimpsed in facts as they are, in ordinary daily life. "Epitaph", "Obstinate in non-attendance" and "Churchyard of St. Mary Magdalene, Old Milton" share the half-smiling perception and wit of Heath-Stubbs' speaking style. The poetry uses more rhythm than rhyme, but the reader lacks nothing either way. Echoes of Yeats and Eliot come in natural settings.

"An Heroic Epistle, from William Congreve to Anne Bracegirdle circa 1729" is to me the most memorable poem in the selection. Here you feel the poet's absorption in writing his poetry for his love to speak on the stage, his bliss when "my words in your mouth were a moment in time", the growing old and out of fashion, and the poet going blind.

Artorius, Heath-Stubbs' heroic poem of King Arthur, written over 30 years, is also available now. Too long and delightfully serious to be more than mentioned here, it has affinities with ancient sources and with T. H. White, and a marvellously vital rhythm in the lines. There are also portions of serious-humorous prose and much reflected application to our own day. In the last of these, the lecturer on the subject of a possible basis for a history of King Arthur's conquest of the Roman Empire, being uplifted by his subject towards the end says, "I become what I say. I bore a banner in the battle order of Artorius ... And I, Taliessin-Tiresias, churchwarden in Gloucester Road or proof-reader for the Press, and evening lecturer in Stukeley Street, foreknew and foresuffered all, and the waste land and the dolorous blow". Surely Charles Williams is here.

Alice Mary Hadfield

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY 1978

11th February, 1978: Stephen Medcalf. Subject: "Objections to Charles Williams".

15th April, 1978: John Allitt. Subject: "The Theme of Paradise in Dante".

20th May, 1978: Annual General Meeting (2.30 p.m.). Lord Beaumont will speak on "Charles Williams and Lay Anglican Theology in the 20th Century".

23-25th June, 1978: Week-end conference at The Grail, Pinner. The theme of the conference will be: "Faith and Fiction: Religion and the Art of the Story-teller". An application form is enclosed.

All meetings (unless otherwise stated) will be held at The Institute of Christian Studies, 84 Margaret Street, London, W.1. and will begin at 2.30 p.m. Each meeting is followed by discussion and tea. The Institute is five minutes' walk from Oxford Circus, up Upper Regent Street, second turning on the right, and on the right hand side near the far end.

Please bring copies of any books which might be referred to at a meeting. There is no fee for members (except at the weekend conference), but 50p must be paid for a guest (each member may bring one guest) and this should be handed to the person in charge of the meeting.

MEETING OF THE S.W. LONDON GROUP (C.W. SOCIETY)

20th April, 1978: this meeting will be held at 78 King's Road, Wimbledon, London S.W.19. and will begin at 8 p.m.

LONDON READING GROUP

4th March, 1978, Saturday, at 7.30 p.m. at Richard and Joan Wallis's flat, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London W.11. (nearest station, Notting Hill Gate).

9th April, 1978, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at Richard and Joan Wallis's flat (see above). Please bring sandwiches. Please note change of address for this meeting from previous Newsletter.

28th May, 1978, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at David and Dulcie Caro's house, 50 Drayton Gardens, London S.W.10. (nearest station, Gloucester Road). Please bring sandwiches. *375 3427*

10th June, 1978, Saturday, at 7.30 p.m. at David and Dulcie Caro's house (see above). *Dante*

8th July, 1978, Saturday, at 7.30 p.m. at Richard and Joan Wallis's flat (see above). *Dante*

6th August, 1978, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at Charles and Alice Mary Hadfield's house, The White Cottage, 21 Randolph Road, London, W.9. (nearest station, Warwick Avenue). Please bring sandwiches. *Narr in season*

5th November, 1978, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at Richard and Joan Wallis's flat (see above). Please bring sandwiches.

At Saturday meetings we read The Figure of Beatrice with Dante's Purgatorio and Paradiso; at Sunday meetings we read Taliessin poems.

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

Chairman: Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London, W11 3BS (221 0057)

Secretary: Dr. Brian Horne, King's College Hostel, Vincent Square, London, S.W.1. (834 4740)

Treasurer: Philip Bovey, 32 Maple Street, London, W.1. (637 0449)

Newsletter Editor: Miss Xenia Howard-Johnston, 13 Princess Road, London, N.W.1. (722 1595)

Membership Secretaries: Jenet and Philip Bovey, 32 Maple Street, London, W.1. (637 0449)

Lending Library: Mrs. Anne Scott, 25 Corfton Road, London, W5 2HP. (997 2667)

NEW MEMBERS (November, 1977)

R. St.J. Andrew, The Old Manse, Kirkmichael, Blairgowrie, Perthshire.

Miss Hilda A. Holland, 78 King's Road, Wimbledon, London, S.W.19.

Canon E. A. James, 43 Holywell Hill, St. Albans, Herts.

Miss S. Lyndrajer, 2 Catherine Court, Lake Road, Wimbledon, London, S.W.19.

Adrian M. K. Thomas, 33 West Hill Park, Merton Lane, Highgate, London, N.6.

Mme. Georgette Versinger, 11 rue du Moulin Vert, 75014 Paris, France.

ADDITIONS TO THE C.W. SOCIETY LIBRARY

Charles Williams: Demanda, Visão e Mito by Fernando de Mello Moser (Lisbon, 1969) presented by the author.

The January, 1976, number of the Portuguese monthly magazine Broteria containing an article on Dialectica e unidade no pensamento de Charles Williams by Fernando de Mello Moser, presented by the author.

Shadows of Ecstasy and Charles Williams: Selected Writings presented by Jennifer Statha.

Theology Today for July, 1953, containing an article on Charles Williams: Lay Theologian by Robert McAfee Brown and The Christian Century for 2nd May, 1956, containing Charles Williams: A Review Article by W. H. Auden presented by Lord Beaumont.

HANDBOOK REFERENCE TO THE C.W. SOCIETY

Last year the English Association together with the Library Association produced a Handbook of societies and collections. Its aim was to list and describe as far as possible '(1) the many societies and associations, national and local, which are concerned with the study and creation of English literature and with the English language, and (2) major libraries and book collections, publicly and privately owned, which specialise in any aspect of these subjects.' It might be of interest to members of the Charles Williams society to know that the society has two entries in this extremely useful little book of reference. First in Section I, 'Societies', where we are listed and take our place alongside the Jane Austen Society, the Dickens Fellowship, the Newman Association etc., and secondly, in Section II, part 3, 'Specialist and notable libraries' where all three of our collections of books and manuscripts are described. The handbook is published at a price of £2-50. and is obtainable from The Library Association, 7 Ridgemount Street, London, W.C.1.

B.L.H.

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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