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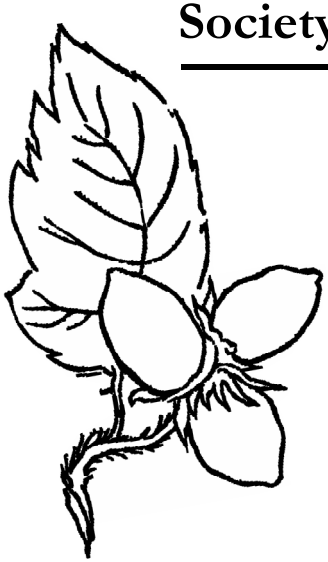
# The Charles Williams Society



## Newsletter

No. 103 Summer 2002

# The Charles Williams Society

The Society was founded in 1975, thirty years after Charles Williams's sudden death at the end of the Second World War. It exists to celebrate Charles Williams and to provide a forum for the exchange of views and information about his life and work.

Members of the Society receive a quarterly newsletter and may attend the Society's meetings which are held three times a year. Facilities for members also include a postal lending library and a reference library housed at King's College London.

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## Reading groups

For information about the **Oxford** reading group please contact Brenda Boughton, tel: 01865 515589.

The Charles Williams Society

No 103 Summer 2002

## From the Editor

This issue contains the conclusion of Gavin Ashenden's paper on the letters of CW to Phyllis Jones and Michal Williams. As previously noted, the paper forms part of Gavin's forthcoming book, *Charles Williams – Alchemy and Integration* to be published by Kent State University Press. We are grateful for this preview. I take this opportunity to ask readers to spare Gavin a thought (and perhaps an email) as he is unwell at present.

Regrettably, both in the first part of Gavin's paper and the short note on her death in CW # 101 Phyllis McDougall's name was spelt incorrectly and I apologise for this.

Edward Gauntlett

# Annual General Meeting Report

The Annual General Meeting of the Charles Williams Society took place on Saturday 15 June 2002 at Pusey House, Oxford.

The Society's AGM took place at Pusey House, Oxford, on June 15th. There were twelve members present. Apologies were received from Mr Carter and Mrs Tinling.

The Secretary said the Society's website had received over 6,000 visits so far. There had been an inquirer about possible publication of Williams's books in Korea, whom he had referred to Bruce Hunter, as copyright owner. Charles Williams's name was now included on the Oxford Diocesan Calendar, to be commemorated on May 15th.

The Librarian said that Mr. Stratford Caldecott, who was in charge of the Chesterton collection at Plater College, was shortly moving to a new Centre for Renaissance and Mediaeval Studies at Oxford. The intention was to establish an Inklings Centre there, and this would obviously be an excellent place for the Reference Library. There would be some expenditure needed for transport and recataloguing, and it would mean a period during which the Reference Library would be inaccessible, between its removal from King's College in July or August and the opening of the new Centre in 2003.

The Treasurer said the finances of the Society were in good order. It cost about £1,000 a year to run (of which £800 was for the Newsletter, and £120 for the cost of meetings). Gift Aid should bring in about £100 a year. Reserves stood at £9,674. He passed out copies of his report, which was accepted unanimously.

The Editor thanked Mr and Mrs Tinling for their work in getting the Newsletter produced and distributed. He was arranging for copies to be deposited with the British Library, and for an ISSN to be issued.

The Membership Secretary reported a drop in numbers from 114 to 81 in the

United Kingdom and 30 to 28 overseas. She also expressed her wish to pass on the post to someone else.

The Chairman mentioned the deaths of Anne Ridler and Phyllis McDougall. There would be no Conference in 2003; it would be good to have one in 2004, but an organizer was needed: she would no longer be able to do it herself. She was trying to get Charles Williams's name onto the Calendar of St .Alban's Abbey. There was now hope that the Williamses' grave could be got into decent condition; it would cost about £1,500. She thanked the officers and Council members, with special thanks to Mrs Kornicka for her work as Membership Secretary.

The following were elected to Council for three years: Mrs Boughton, Mr Carter, Mr Gauntlett, Dr Horne, Mrs Kornicka, Mrs Mable and Dr Sturch. Mr Barber and Mr Jeffery had been elected the previous year and continued in office.

Mrs Lunn mentioned that Richard Wallis, our former Chairman, had recently celebrated his ninetieth birthday. The Chairman would send a retrospective greeting, and also one to our President, whose birthday would be the following Thursday. Mr Medcalf mentioned the recent illness of Gavin Ashenden, to whom the Chairman would also write.

The AGM was preceded by a meeting of Council; most of the business transacted there was also brought up at the AGM.

Richard Sturch

# Society News & Notes

## Anne Ridler Memorial

The University Church of St Mary the Virgin at Oxford was full on Saturday 9 March for the Memorial and Thanksgiving Service for Anne Ridler. Our Society, to which Anne gave so much support and encouragement, was represented by the Chairman and several members.

The whole Service – words, music, Canon Donald Allchin's address – was an evocation of Anne herself. There were readings, by family and friends, from Anne's memoirs and, from among her poems, "Nothing is Lost" and "Choosing a Name". Most poignant was the chastely sung "Ché Faró?" from Anne's translation of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice.*

John Donne's great prayer "Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening" was followed by a collect written by Charles Williams. The closing hymn "Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go" was an encouragement and, surely, a reminder to some of those present of Anne's essentially practical nature.

Her life, for which we gave thanks, was good. Her gifts to those who knew her and, through her poetry to those who did not, are great.

## Alliance of Literary Socities

The ALS, jointly with The DT Charitable Trust is sponsoring an essay competition on the subject "Does 19th century fiction have anything to say to a 21st century audience?" Essays must be no more than 1,000 words (typed double spaced with a cover sheet giving the entrant's name, address and phone number) and posted to ALS Joint Competition, DT Charitable Trust, PO Box 6055, Nairn IV12 4YB by 15 October 2002. The first prize is £100 and the second a £25 book token. As members of a literary society within the ALS we are eligible to take part in this competition for which there is no entry fee or form. The winning entry will be published in both organizations' magazines.

## New Member

We extend a warm welcome to the following new member of the Charles Williams Society:

David White, 35 Luella Street, Rochester, NY 14609, USA.

# Charles Williams Society Meetings

- **Saturday 2 November 2002**
  Canon Donald Allchin will speak on 'Charles Williams and Anne Ridler' in the Church Room, St Matthews Church, St Petersburgh Place, Bayswater, London W2 at 2.30 pm.

- **Saturday 22 February 2003**
  Edward Gauntlett will speak on 'Charles Williams and Magic' in the Church Room, St Matthews Church, St Petersburgh Place, Bayswater, London W2 at 2.30 pm.

- **Saturday 21 June 2003**
  Bishop Kallistos Ware will speak on 'Heaven and Hell in Charles Williams' in Pusey House, St Giles, Oxford at 2.30 pm.

- **Saturday 25 October 2003**
  Revd. Dr. Richard Sturch will speak, title to be decided, in the Church Room, St Matthews Church, St Petersburgh Place, Bayswater, London W2 at 2.30 pm.

# The Quest for Integration: *The Century* & Correspondence from the later years.

By Revd. Dr. Gavin Ashenden.

*(The conclusion of the paper begun in CW # 102)*

**THE UNSEEN LETTERS TO CELIA**

Of all my sins I count least the taking of that adoration[49]

The unseen letters comprise material that spans the years 1935-1942. There was a clue in her interview as to why Phyllis (now) McDougall had kept the material from A. M. Hadfield. "When the bombing started, Alice Mary went to stay with her brother abroad, so she wasn't aware of anything that happened in Oxford during that period."[50] It seems that Phyllis McDougall was glad to keep some privacy from the eye of the biographer. The letters offer evidence that the integrity of the vision of Celia stayed with Williams to within three years of his death. It may be that it stayed to the end, but since he ceased to write to Phyllis McDougall in 1942, it cannot be ascertained. What is known, is that having ceased to write to Phyllis, his letters to Michal develop a quality of emotional intensity that they lack before that date. To use the parallel of Dante, Williams had both the vision of Beatrice, and the subsequent woman at the window; both Michal and Celia. At the level of beatific vision, they are both aspects of the face of God. At the level of human engagement, the visions were of two women, one of whom he was married to and the other not. The vision itself carries its own integrity and integration. Whereas the nature of the human relationships by which the vision comes, does not. If Williams was tempted to neglect what he had seen in Michal for the fresher though inaccessible vision of Celia, it would not have been surprising. The evidence of the correspondence is that the integrity of the vision itself drew him to find a reconciliation between the two manifestations of his perceptions relocated within his marriage by the end of his life.

The letters to Celia range from chat, to inarticulate colloquy; from emotional support to spiritual direction. They encompass his directing her reading of Browning to reflections on some of the great themes that Williams had shared with her over the years, and that had developed through the Celian lucidity.

There were many parallels with Dante. In particular that the vision had thrust itself on Williams much as it had on Dante.

> The general maxim of the whole way in Dante is attention; 'look', 'look well'. At the beginning he is compelled to look by the shock of the vision; later his attention is enforced by command and he obeys by choice. At the beginning, two of the three images—poetry and the city—are habitual to him though still fresh and young they do not astonish him. But Beatrice does. *Incipit Vita Nova*. It was, with Dante as with Wordsworth, 'the bodily eye . . .
>
> > Which spake perpetual logic to my soul,
> > And by the unrelenting agency
> > Did bind my feelings even as in a chain."[51]

The perpetual logic expressed itself with an unrelenting pace in his letters. On the 17th of August 1938 Williams wrote a long letter from Amen House shortly before the move to Oxford. The letter contains a reminder of the integrity of the original vision, but contains one or two other elements that were present in the poems. There remains the blurring of the distinction between not just Phyllis, but Celia and the godhead. At one point he invokes a Celian Hail Mary: "Hail, full of grace, The Lord is with thee, and so believe it or not, he is. It is now, for it was."[52] After a conventional opening, he re-opens the letter his idiosyncratic mannered formula: "Exalted and most precious, now and forever, by the unpretended beauty that held us, and you in whom it was so fresh...". The context becomes a conversation that Williams had had with others about her, and he compares their impressions with his vision.

> "You all of you", said I once, "talk of this and that in her, and you admire or you dislike, and you love, and so on, but none of you all believes in her as I have done, do, and shall do. But the details of our acquaintanceship I did not give; only I went on: "and if she chooses (within herself) this or the other way, why, that is her affair, but I believe in her as I saw, and I will believe in her [']till I die and after' and so, whatever she does, whatever she is, I most assuredly do." And something like that I really, did say, and I really did mean. I don't blame them, of course; they hadn't the same advantages. But I must be allowed my own knowledge. And when you cannot believe ... what-

> ever, why, you will know that I believe in you, and you will - I dare not say "rest" in that.
>
> ....
>
> I have written myself into what may sound like encouragement or what not; it was not meant that way so much as the mere fact. Overlook it, and let us return to other things.[53]

His reference to the clarity of his sight of her is intended to offer her some support in the face of her difficulties, and what appears to be plunging self-esteem. On a number of occasions he offered her what amounted to spiritual direction that derived from what he had seen.

> Is it quite impossible to explain to anyone that the fact that God has chosen to reveal the Celian glory of Celia through Celia leaves Celia as mortal, as sinful, as disgusting as - oneself? I forgive B.,[54] because the language is akin to him, but I should like to disillude (*sic*) him. I will bet a good deal that even he has no lower opinion of you than I have, and as for the higher - that is no "opinion" but a revelation, and not any where or at anytime can that alter, as you -
>
> Your Commander has just arrived in the Library and rung me up: I'll resume later.

Williams refers on at least two occasions to luncheon appointments with Lieutenant Commander McDougall, the man she will marry after her divorce. When he does resume it is to offer some guidance about her experience of isolation and hellishness. He points out the practical necessity of interdependence, the co-inherence of all our lives as we depend on one another and God, and the reality of despair felt by both Messias, and St. Paul. His fountain pen has dried and is faint as he begins to write again:

> My pen has abandoned me; excuse. But, having said all that, it is true that you are not to believe, in any sort of kind of way, final.[55] It is one of the Dark Lights - "things spoken seem unfamiliar when they happen". You are precisely not in hell; hell is final loss. You are not cut off, though it may seem, smell, and taste like it. You are not cut off - you are much

more like in union with Love and Dante and St Paul. You can't save yourself - but you can believe (if only in the most usual way) that others will.

"Others he saved; himself he cannot save". Consider, most dear lady, that if Messias knew that state, it was probably because of something mildly serious. "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" If St Paul meant that, he probably meant something almost tangibly corrupt.

*Tanto è amora, che poco è piu morte* - probably Dante meant precisely that he re-discovered himself in the midst of a dark and savage wood - just like that - and the voice of Virgil was faint as of a ghost.

We do not begin to know ourselves until we are left to ourselves -. It is like the Particular Judgement - there we are, and there is Abraham's bosom or Beatrice or whatnot, and we have taken the wrong turning - quite deliberately, quite unconsciously, quite certainly. We knew it at the time, though we may have forgotten it now. Why this? "my dear fellow - my dear girl - you would have this?" you would - so whatever. You would have you: this is you. Have it -

'In the midst of this confusion and amazement, where no thought could be formed or any idea retained, save grim, eternal death possessing my whole man, a voice was formed and uttered in me, as from the centre of boundless darkness: "thy will, O God, be done: if this be thy act alone, and not my own, I yield my soul to thee"'.

So Mr Thomas Storey,[56] on the first of February, 1689; you will remark his method is not to try to move it - the grim eternal death - but to push into it. 'Press inward; it is there the thing yields.'[57]

As Phyllis moves out of her marriage to Billie Somervaille and towards Lieutenant Commander McDougall, Williams attempts to offer some personal support and consolation. In particular he refers both to his vision of her, and the sense of her potential that it incorporates, and also a mythic scheme of development of maturation (which incorporates part of what he was offering Lois Lang-Sims, and places it in a broader context). It appears to be less the fixations of sado-masochistic abuse -however mild- and more a mythic journey, the final aspect of

which is described as "Galahad state." From the Taliessin cycle this is clearly the reconciliation of the balanced duality of affirmation and negation. David Llewellyn Dodds describes the state of Galahad as that of turning from God's images to God himself.[58] In 'The Departure of Dindrane', she hears Galahad's voice - quoting his last words according in Malory (XVll,22), and giving them the new synthesis of the two ways:

> 'Fair Lord, salute me to my Lord Sir Lancelot my father,
> and bid him remember of this unstable world'
> The grand Rejection sang to the grand Affirmation;[59]

Williams combines this with the not inconsiderable imaginative leap of relating the menstrual periods to the crucifixion, and therefore the menopause to the making of the Wounded King at Carbonek.

> That was before lunch; I resume, having spent a long and conversational lunch with your Commander. We have looked at the situation from every point of view, and parted at the bottom of Ludgate Hill. But nothing recurs to me as of high urgency to mention that he could not do much better himself. We do not always see absolutely eye to eye, but we have at least in common the tendency to treat you as actuality - my romantic view leading us at once to a lower and higher aspect of you than his, but that's of no value.
>
> I imagine that, at present, there can be very little light or joy in Middleton:[60] that sounds heavy; 'tis not meant so. But as far as these family situations go I have them (you will let me say) taped. I cannot think of any worse situation than yours (except possibly Billy's) - and if I say it is universal you will not think I reckon it the less trying. But you will not think you are necessarily less inclined towards sanctity (if -) because the surroundings and you seem like hell. I'm not sure how much you meant the word to cover...
>
> This is all very badly put. I revert, on the chance of answering you, to myself. It has occurred to me lately that my next group of poems may deal with two points in which, you know, I have always half believed (i) the relation to woman's periods to the Crucifixion (ii) the debatable problem of whether women are more admirable, after, say, 45 or 50 than before. I was struck the other day by the notion that the "change of life" in

> women is not so unlike the healing of the Wounded King at Carbonek by the High Prince. Both involve the cessation of bloodshed, and both involve the showing of a clearer pattern than previously. It seems to me that one might reasonably consider life - especially feminine life - in three stages: (a) the slave-state (b) the Blanchefleur state (c) - after the change - the Galahad state. (my Galahad - not Lord Tennyson's or whoever). In fact that, wherever the first two have been adequately followed, the ensuing third might make the vision even more effectual than before. I have never, as you know much believed in this failing of the beauty of women after 45 or so, and if the Healing of Pelles is, in some sense, the change of life, then it's mere nonsense. Undoubtedly the myth bears this understanding. I know it is not popular, but what is popular that is great?
>
> You will say this is not very clear; perhaps not. But anyhow I propose to throw it out as a suggestion to any young woman I know; if they can expect the change as (mythically) the coming of the High Prince in the blood into achievement, so much the better. As for you, I have said so too often for you to doubt my principles on the matter, and (if all goes as we hope) I recommend it to you as the method of your expectation.
>
> I leave it at that. [61]

In a passage of unusual lucidity he offers a 'quadruple explanation' to Phyllis of the significance of the body, and in particular her arms, for him. His poetry is heavily dependent on the symbolism of physical imagery, and always attracts comment, so that it is of considerable interest when he links her arms both to the notion of sensual energy, but also to what he describes as the 'universal imagination'. It is, he claims, also a way of describing his essential notion of the 'feeling intellect.' In the letter he underlines 'feeling' as though the sensuality and physicality of the body is the means to accessing an affective element to balance the cerebralness of the notion of intellect. In case, despite the erotic overtones of his letter to her, she thinks this applies only to her, he explains "that I am aware that this quadruple sense of the arms applies everywhere - to everybody, I mean - and one moves often in a light sensuous and imaginative cloud of it." His explanation of his understanding of sexual energy goes some way to explain his ritualistic behaviour with Lois Lang-Sims and Joan Wallis. It does at least set it within his aesthetic as well as intellectual response to surrounding reality and his understanding of the metaphysical. It also demonstrates an integration of the aesthetic,

intellectual, physical, and sexual in his own experience. It leaves open the question as to whether or not this was a result of his immersion in hermetic culture, or whether the latter was an expression of his own preferences.

> Arms? did you ask or did I dream? but If I were answering, what should I say? I should say:
>
> 1. The sight of your arms rouses in me both sensation and imagination. I feel them within me, thrust into my physical centre, probing, exciting, and uniting round them all the bodily functions; so that to touch or kiss them is an achievement and a great need.
>
> 2. At the same time there is an intense visual sense - an imagination, a vision - of seeing the very centre of all living measurements. They are everything I mean by "the hazel". "The hazel" has many categories, but your arms are, at the time, the central "identity" of what they all mean. That is why, as I said yesterday, when you pick up a ruler, the ruler is their unliving prolongation (the cut hazel, but they are both the cut and the servant.)
>
> 3. They are Will. Thus, for them to be given or held is an act of will. Now the union of wills is in fact sweeter even than (1), though more rarely felt; and is an example of (2) the greatest example. So that to feel and see your will in them, knowing and assenting to (1) and (2) is the crown of a mutual activity. Whether that activity was writing poetry or writing Browning or doing other things I am not sure that the frustration of any discovery of this mutual will is not the most serious defeat.
>
> 4. But the arms are only part of the body. and what is true of them is true of the whole body, in many complex ways - sensual and intellectual. They are a whole country and yet a frontier. And this double sense in them is another, as it were, initiation.
>
> 5. I am aware that this quadruple sense of the arms applies everywhere - to everybody, I mean. and one moves often in a light sensuous and imaginative cloud of it. but there are very few indeed of whom one begins to feel (1) and fewer from whom one wishes (3). so that, by and large (and allowing for momentary diversions), the effect of the cloud is

> to send one back to the primary examples of the cloud. I allow (being more sexual than ever before) that this is sexual energy: but also (being more imaginative than ever before!) I think the sexual is part of the universal imagination. It is, in its way precisely the "feeling intellect"![62]

In an undated poem entitled 'A Letter' which would appear to be later than 1941 (since it follows on from a letter of that date referring to Mother Julian below), Williams summarises his reflections on the arms and associates himself with Julian theology;

> finding, after so long,
> the august Authority, holy Imagination,
> living in body and soul, the great single
> revealed Union (short of the final union)-
> that is all I was saying in Taliessin;
> you should now feel your new faculties,
> the perfect recognition, one with it:
> (though I admit the greater might destroy the lesser
> and the mirror of the highest reaches be broken in the reaches)
> we always need another arm to thrust
> the ship on: as in Virgil's poem - O marvel!-
> 'the fine fair arm of pine-changed Cymodocea'
> thrust Aeneas to Rome. O arms, arms!
> everything sensual and metaphysical there
> rides together: the central neural spasm
> blurs it, too much considered: the arms are space,
> the arms are hazel - I saw it so once;
> everything is in the body - source and measurement:
> I am the most material poet that lived
> since Lucretius: almost as sensual indeed
> as the Lady Julian of Norwich, that recluse of sanctity,
> who said where the soul and flesh met God
> built his City. It is the City we explore -
> the hazel, Blanchefleur, Galahad; modes of the City:
> you ? all; all three;

Pass: good-bye.[63]

What we do know from the internal evidence of the poem is that it was written in the middle of the night whilst Williams was being kept awake by physical pain; and in it he begs for sleep as the planes are noisy still, "and I want to sleep before the last lecture / on the Incantation of Wordsworth's glory." In another letter which is dated July 1941, he amplifies what he means by his sense of theological kinship with Mother Julian.

> was it not the lady Julian who said: "where Circassia and Celia meet, there God builds his city", and she did, you know; she did say precisely that, substituting "sensualitie" and "self-soul", but they mean that: and I will give you the maxim again as a first truth - "where Circassia and Celia meet there God builds his city". Is not the Blessed Sacrament itself eaten?"[64]

A good deal has been written about Williams's preoccupation with the idea of power,[65] but in his letters to Phyllis he provides some insight as to how the myth of Celia and the presence of Phyllis provide power or energy. He compares Wordsworth and Yeats, and then comments on how the power needs to be evoked.

> I think you had and have power - "the feeling intellect" upon which I have dilated to the University. I think certainly that probably all power has to be evoked -in me by the vision of structure, in you by the images of love. You have power, but it works better under evocation and in ...order[66] , say; just as mine works better for, as it were, a signal flashed along the line of creation. Do I talk nonsense? or too obscurely? I do not think so. "we live by others"; you and I know that - though very unexpected others we may find ourselves living by. Be blessed always so.[67]

Later in the letter he refers to Celia as the original 'hazel' and is attempting to encourage her to enter into a correspondence about Browning (which she does) The suggestion, albeit obscurely made, is that if she applies herself to verse - in this case Browning - a power is evoked.

> and is not the measurement of the power of verse part of the business of the hazel? what else did Virgil give it to Taliessin for? and are not you always free to impose yourself on any verse as you chose.

He insists that he will not have her "unfair to her spirit; no human being could be as full of celerity as you seem; nor you ?" This evocation of poetic power is part of the expression of the reality of the myth of Celia. In another passage on Wordsworth, he writes about the association between Wordsworth and Celia in his mind, again connecting them both with the notion of power: "there is no power in the Prelude unless one draws it out" (he writes), and the myth of Celia is for the means of evoking that power. The occult overtones arise from his suggesting to her that there are 'ways' of dealing with sleeplessness: "a magical method for banishing an image" which he will not use. But her image has kept him awake:

> You go on in my head exactly like a trumpet - yes; a kind of sight instantaneously transmuted into sound - a silent sound, I suppose ... no, of course, I have it wrong; it is sound transmuted into sight, I now realise that you are a kind of sound, and one way that becomes you to the rights and another way it sets you up a kind of exact echo in the actions of others about you, as in my poetry or whatever and all the rest answers to that in me. Well, but I did not mean to go all metaphysical or whatever you call it. It is three o'clock in the morning; you have kept me awake for hours...It must, I think be Wordsworth; one can never quite separate Wordsworth from you - at least when one thinks of what he means by Power. You are to-night the very image of that Power; you are it living and tangible. O I know, I know; a score of other Images, feminine and other, move on the edge - as if on the edge of the circle, the magical circle of the central height where you are - I will dissolve and free you (which, I allow, is a gift of freedom to one at the moment unconscious of the circle), but the power, I expect, is like a trumpet call made visible. Wordsworth and Celia, Celia and Wordsworth - is the double name sweeter than either single? perhaps not? why compare? "say but again" "Celia and Wordsworth, Wordsworth and Celia" (which I did aloud as I wrote, and you have no idea how well it sounded), unless it be unique.
>
> Power - you will reject the word, rashly perhaps. But I agree it might be a dream like use of the words; no, nonsense; we do not dream, not <u>dream</u>. After all, there is no power in the *Prelude* unless one draws it out, yet the verbal shape is there. [68]

He continues in the letter to reflect on the inadequacies of the pentagram when compared to his sense of her at the Eucharist. As in *The Century*, he continues to combine in her both a romantic and aesthetic potency along with attributions of religious devotion that are almost Marian in tone. He writes of how at the Midnight celebration three weeks before "I almost saw you over the altar among the incense smoke".

In a letter dated the following year, Maundy Thursday 1941, his writing was rambling and increasingly incoherent. Cavaliero describes the growing incoherence of this period as he observed in the *Letters to Lalage*. Although 1943, the period of that correspondence was somewhat later, and it may be that the level of nervous tension Williams experienced had caused less of a deterioration than was to come, nonetheless Cavaliero's analysis of some of the Lalage correspondence also applies here:

> Some of them are so elliptical and allusive as to be well nigh unintelligible reading more like the words of a man in colloquy with himself than those engaged in a dialogue with another.[69]

The context here is also one of rambling associations, for which he anticipates being rebuked by Celia, - "but you will say 'this is old stuff; I know it all by heart; change or cease the song."- But in the middle of the deluge of associations, Williams turns to Yeats, and the question of the attributes the women who are loved by the poets assume.

> The women whom the poets loved - did they put on any of the poets' genius, or remain their earthly selves? - based on the question asked by Mr. William Butler Yeats - "did she put on his knowledge with his power?" but I think the answer ought to be that her power was her own, and his powers his own, and that she put on only his knowledge (or perhaps that strange quality which we call "faith"), so their powers intermingled and became a new power - perhaps of a lowlier hierarchy.[70]

This comes as close as he ever does to describing the symbiosis between poet and myth that produces the energy or power to create. It is not without significance that he attributes a description that appears to have a strong association with the theology of hermetic culture. Hierarchies played an important part in the Sephirotic and Qabalistic cultures, and it is to that language that he turns in order to describe the non-corporeal intermingling of his art and its muse.

The last letters to Celia are dated in 1942, and show a growing and disturbing incoherence. Phyllis McDougall commented:

> The Oxford period was the period when our relations were at their lowest. That was the period when I had married again. After Roddy was born (1942), I don't suppose I saw him except at a distance for the last years of his life.[71]

It was a period of transition. Although at this stage of his life he began his letters to Lois Lang-Sims, the evidence of the letters to Michal[72] is that at this time he found a new energy and level of romanticised engagement with his wife. One might interpret it as either born of emotional need (since there is little doubt that his state of mind was becoming increasingly fragile), or that it was the response of the removal of the second myth which while it proved artistically fruitful, was personally destructive.[73] One of his unpublished poems to Phyllis expresses something of the profound frustration; *viz*., the Celian vision imposed on him and his increasing sense of isolation and discomfort.

O by thy presence and thine absence thou,
I cannot love but thee, I cannot need
but thee, I cannot falter or succeed
but by the desperation of that brow
which throws back what it gathers up; then how
may I endure society? my greed
lies hungry at my heart, grown sick to feed
on what illusions the whole world endow.

I hate them, and that gathered hatred swells
into the greed it nourishes; the sneer
mocks its own source, and every movement tells
itself in me it moves out of thy sphere.
A madness bites my throat; strike these, and call
that hatred thine, and strive with me in all.[74]

**THE LETTERS TO MICHAL**

The letters to Michal begin after the 7th of September 1939, when Williams moved with his colleagues from the Press at Amen House to Oxford. He was billeted with the Spaldings at 9 South Parks Road. From there he wrote to his wife

regularly throughout the Second World War until his final letter on the 8th of May, a week before his impending death on May 15th 1945.

The form of myth associated with his wife was more subtle than many of the others. It may have been in part because her reputed force of character acted as a constraint on her mythologisation. Certainly her being named Michal, the King Saul's daughter who mocked David when he danced, is evidence of her robust character. She contributed to two additional mythical literary figures, the Bors-Elayne figures in the Taliessin cycle, and also Beatrice. Neither of these myths contained Michal; but they both were to some extent inspired or evoked by her.

Williams's letters to his wife fall between a mundane realism that one might expect in a marriage that was eighteen years old and had weathered the crisis of the disruption of an all-too long 'Celian moment', and, towards the end, heightened romantic awareness. This revivified romanticism appears to gather pace begins in 1942, the year he ceased writing to Celia.

Unlike the letters to Lalage or Celia, there is no soliloquising.[75] The writing is sharp, open, and honest. At first sight the romanticism of the last three years seems rather strained. This may partly be that Williams at his lesser moments, as C. S. Lewis criticised him, was capable of combining the style of Dante with that of P. G. Wodehouse.[76] While this was more descriptive of his novels, something of this crept into his letters when he was at his most lyrical. It may be in part too, because there was an element of trying too hard, as compensation for the years when his romantic vision had been fixed on another compass bearing. As his death approaches and he experiences a creeping mental and physical deterioration, it becomes clearer that both his dependence and sincerity become authentic.

The early letters are, however, of a cooler tone and slimmer emotional investment. He remains wedded to an intellectual commitment to Michal, even if his emotional and aesthetic-erotic instincts have been re-directed. As always, he depends on the notion of vision for his perception of her significance. He writes of a medieval cerebralism that rationalises the split between head and heart, or rather, between his unconsciously galvanised life of instinct and the more consciously controlled commitment that grew out of his alert sense of metaphysical propriety.

> There was in the Middle ages a phrase *Amor Intellectualis*, intellectual love, and for that matter there still is; the philosophers use it; but that is the way in which I look at you. For as I have always said and shall always say, the speed of your motion is a thing to be studied carefully. In the period between my early verse and - all that I have not yet been able to do - I ought to be doing more - I have continuously brooded on that movement and that speed: indeed I think any speed in the present verse is due

> to your physicality. *Amor Intellectualis*, I love you with vision, but though the vision is mine, the spectacle is yours: that is you provide it.[77]

The early letters have this tone about them, and the romantic affirmations of the post 1943 letters are, on the whole, missing. There is a banter in the letters which paints in some of the colours of the marriage at this stage and reflect Michal's robust character, as for example:

> I have observed before that it is generally recognised in the England of today that the one practically certain way of getting me to do anything is to pray to God to move you to suggest it. I may do things you do not suggest, ...[b]ut that I should not accept your High Lordliness's suggestions or dicta is unheard of.[78]

Given that Elayne is portrayed with hair the colour of Celia - "It was said once that your hair was the colour of corn"[79] - it is safer to say that Williams related to Bors as the Husband of Michal, rather than making a direct connection between Michal and Elayne. But it is also clear that if Williams identified with Bors, he did so under the influence of Michal and marriage.

> Your letters are so sweet and kind and loving that they almost made me cry; at least they did this morning...[a]nd I must content myself and I hope God (How strange it is that I always feel my late verse so responsible to God and you....[t]hough as far as Taliessin goes, neither God nor you are directly mentioned, but you both brood over it.)[80]

When he had written the poem 'Bors to Elayne: on the King's Coins' there was no great sense of passionate involvement, more the 'doctrine' in her hands. Bors "saw you stand, in your hand the bread of love, in your head the lightness of law". By 1944, Williams wanted to augment Bors's experience, and suggested as much. In a letter written on the 29th of November 1944 (below), he demonstrates the movement of identification that has taken place from Taliessin to Bors. This may reflect the reorientation of his priorities from that of flourishing as an established poet, to simply surviving with Michal. His later letters put a high premium on survival. A month from his death he wrote: "Now I know better. I would rather have a comfortable home for the rest of our lives than write the *Aeneid*."[81] But in November 1944 he contemplates the addition of verses that reflect his re-

newed devotion. The beginning and end of his adult life are reconciled in an experience that fuses his fractured domestic vision in the integrity of co-inherence.

> I am thinking of inserting a passage in one of the Bors-Elayne poems beginning
>
> > Shall I fall in love with you all over again ?
> > Twice -- with you then as with you now,
> > either co-inherent in either, that brow
> > in this and this in that, but both now
> > known in the one, and a double glory so....
>
> All this through looking at your photograph in the small room. Bors in the poems is a sound fellow, and I hope I am not too unlike him; the divine Taliessin himself is too great for me, and is indeed not so much a man at all as the very Nature of Poetry. Now there is something for you to tell the later enquirers when they come. But I am still very cross at not being able to send more poems at once -- or to write them at least.
>
> I'm very glad about 31, and it's sweet for you to be pleased. You'll observe that in old age I'm getting far more quick at what you might call 'taking notice'. Like Bors again, who (I feel) would be absolutely efficient; which was why he was let in on the Grail. Taliessin would have written a long metaphysical poem about it! no - don't let's be unfair; but he was hardly of human birth (see the Stars) and could hardly enter into domesticity; anyhow, he never did."[82]

However the image of Beatrice first impinged on Williams, with him as with Dante, "it remained there and was deliberately renewed."[83] The frontispiece is dedicated "For Michal in redemption of a promise", and he is explicit that it is his marital experience which has provided the galvanising vision for his Dantean interpretation. Michal's presence made a difference to his writing. He wants to come home and begin the *Figure of Arthur*.

> I should like to begin it at home during this next weekend -like the Missionary Play;[84] I believe or like to believe, but in fact I do - things go bet-

> ter then. After all Beatrice was written with You about and it's been the only good book I've done since '39.[85]

But it is more than just her presence. Michal was central to the whole exposition;

> It's not been an easy business - for me or for you- and yet, O sweet, to what a labour you committed us both when you first admired the Silver Stair. You might....[y]ou have always been the first and great Influence; Dante was but because of you.[86]

When the *Figure of Beatrice* was published, Williams took great care to send his wife a copy of T .S. Eliot's review in the 'T.L.S.'

> I send you herewith the T.L.S. review of Beatrice. I searched Oxford for a copy of this; not only because it's quite a good & certainly a long review, but also because it is the best short statement, by anyone but me. If you substitute Michal for Beatrice, then you get the whole thing, so far as I can see it, that I have been saying since I met you on that January day in 1907.
>
> How astonishing it seems to me that your Sublime Serenity should ever have doubted that unceasing cry! What is the intellect (admirable as yours and mine is!), what is this or that, what is happiness itself, compared to that intuitive knowledge ? That- which is never clouded by disputes over the years; that which is apt to gleam as brightly from your smile or your wit, your head or your hand, as ever it did; that, to which I have never, never been false - not though the whole of creation had, and has, to be, its balance and compare; that - to which you and (one must certainly add) Beatrice are the only public witnesses in 600 years. O I could add 'that' to 'that' & never stop. Why, to send you money (poor as it is) is not, and never has been, merely to send money to one's wife; it is to maintain in action that translucent thing, it is to serve a demi-goddess ('she seemed to him the daughter of a god'), to bear witness to a Fact as fixed as breath itself. Live up to it ? can you ? can I? - but lose it ever? never you, never I. And infinite charity is demanded by it; this is its seal in heaven; its certificate on earth. Still wear that royalty dar-

> ling! I am often a fool, but never the kind that is blind to that. You need not fear - it is not only unnecessary, it is impossible, for that Virtue to fail. My ink runs out. Believe. Serge.

Although Williams appeared pleased with it, it is not uncritical of what Eliot believed to be unnecessary obscurity.[87] But Eliot did suggest that when Williams wrote about 'the poem' in a passage he quoted,

> If the name of Beatrice be substituted for 'the poem' throughout this admirable passage, the result will accurately express the way in which, according to Mr Williams's view, the whole of Dantean thought is summed up in her person. [88]

'Beatrice' embodies the poem for Eliot, and 'Michal' embodies Beatrice for Williams. But when Williams goes further to reassure her in the face of doubt that she has that she and Beatrice are the only public witnesses to the intuitive knowledge of this insight, there is some possibility that 'public' may covertly refer to the intrusion of Celia. Whatever the sub-text, it becomes clear as the correspondence develops that Michal was responsible for an ongoing validity of the vision which enlightened Williams's poetic metaphysic. There was a very practical side to the love she represented. Williams was, in fact, considerably dependent on her.

> As for pride, I was very much struck by your distinction between it and the assumption of it; let us discuss it. But not at all noblest of women, by your other distinction. Your great gifts which are rare and beautiful, are as much given as mine and mine as yours. Yours are Beauty, Intelligence, Speed, Charity, and Delight. (I include Wit under Intelligence). Mine are Speech, Doctrine, Poetry and a certain Lucidity. And we have Labour in Common. Yours are of value to things done; mine to things known. We are the world's infinite complements; we are necessary to each other. I study in you the Thing happening. You observe in me the Thing declared...O I babble, but we do but grow to one Thing in two modes. And indeed three - you, I and we. The we being now much more the root of you and I than the other way round. Which is why we carry ourselves with a high courtesy towards each other...or as high as our fallen natures allow.[89]

It was not only a generative complementarity that flourished between them, Williams credits his wife for bolstering him against a good deal of mental and spiritual distress.

> I ought always to be grateful to you for saving me from persecution manias, false fancies and all the rest. Consider dearest that any obstinate accuracy of mine is very largely due to you; who never allowed me to get into the group of grim shadows. It is no doubt your eyes which (as I had the honour to say) are as bright as ever, and which illuminate the mind and soul as well as the flesh.[90]

In February 1945, he was clear that "all I want in this world is you, a bearable place to live, some money and enough distant publicity to bring in money and be amusing." But he had been experiencing a distressing distancing of himself from his surroundings.

> I feel more and more as if a kind of shell of me went on operating in the world, and being as adequate as possible and even (let us hope!) agreeable, but without any communion with me. It's a very odd sensation, but I suppose inevitable when one has lived for years, most of the time, in a town where no-one touches one's heart, or makes the slightest difference to one's feelings...[B]ut where is the real 'I' ? In your heart (the rest is missing...) [91]

As the untimely end approached he noticed that this detachment in him had grown. He wrote of it in a letter dated the 17th of February 1945. This depersonalisation was only modified and moderated in his intimacy with Lewis, Eliot, and particularly at home; but nowhere else.

> As for the rest - I'm a little conscious myself of a certain new detachment. What you might call my 'field of operations' has widened, but it's more markedly remote. I mean that I'm even more of a...prophet ? priest? something - more of a Voice and less of a man everywhere except at home. At least, that's what I feel. I always was pretty much of a slightly non-personal figure, and all my 'interests' in figures rather than in people. Perhaps the people in my novels grew more real as my consciousness of actual people decreases. I've never been able to express

> this very well; but somehow, except at home...and perhaps at Magdalen or with Eliot...I am always aware of a gulf. My voice or my style goes across it, but my heart doesn't.[92]

In much the same way as he had always been inspired by the body of the beloved he expressed his love for Michal in the acceptable hermetic enculturated spirit-infused physicality. He missed her. "The turn of the wrist, the gleam of the brow, the glance, the agreement, the togetherness...where are these? In London."[93] But more categorically, "your face fixed the Universe" he claimed, following Yeats and the language of hermetic culture.

> The civilised centre of my own time and space lies in London; your face fixed the Universe, and it is of that hint that we speak. 'A beautiful woman's body' said Yeats, 'is a passion of the intellect'; when I am old I shall find you proper praise. Be content with this the while.[94]

The image of her physicality was matched by her way of loving, what Williams referred to as a "diagram of charity". Not content with his own vision, he attributes it to St. Paul and his ecclesiology.

> It is fresh fire as well as fresh springs which leap in you. Your excellency is to consider that few women retain their fresh-fire of nature and super-nature so long. Charity is justified in you; say, love; the N.T. and you make the word believable. You are a 'form' of love, a diagram of charity; you 'suffer long and are kind' O exquisite definition! yet St. Paul did not know you when he wrote it.
>
> I will suppose he foresaw you on a vision - in his prison at Rome. Why not ? it is on such beauty of sanctity as yours that the whole Church depends. I do but write truth. My eyes are coldishly (*sic*) watering; or is it tears of admiration? call it so; they could never be sufficient.[95]

He mused once on the prospect of becoming a Parish Priest, and although he saw himself as a poor priest capable of teaching doctrine only, all the babies and old ladies in England would have moved into the Parish to be taught love by her.[96]

Two letters from the last six months of his life contain small endearments that are deeply poignant in the light of his approaching death. He wrote at the end of a dull and dreadful day,

> Why are you not meeting me? and why are we not having a beautiful and drunken dinner - like what we both had once in a Corner House, after going up Westminster Cathedral Tower in a lift, do you remember ?[97]

In his last letter dated two days before he collapsed on the 10th of May he wrote words heavy with pathos, carrying a double meaning. He means them to refer to the ending of hostilities. But they were also personally prophetic.

> I have missed you a great deal today. I should have liked to knock about with you - but there it is!
>
> And it's done. I've a dim sense of relief... the awful days when I thought the enemy might forever be between me and you didn't come to the worst. The mournings and the buryings are done. And presently... There couldn't have been a better Peace Sunday than last. I wish we were here together, but that was very good. And now it's nice to be done.[98]

Forty eight hours later he was taken ill. He was admitted to the Radcliffe, and on the fifteenth of May he died. The 'impossibility' was over. Faced with the irreconcilable dual vision of romantic adoration, Williams struggled to retain what integrity he could and endure to the end. It is not possible to enter into anything more than a superficial judgement as to the extent to which he reconciled both visions in Michal in the latter years. But he appears to have done so. Equally importantly he maintained a consistency with his own analysis of what was required by those who had begun a journey which held fidelity to the image and the principle within and beyond the image. If his hermetic reflexes enabled him to identify the vision and the image beyond it, something more than that gave him the courage to pursue the development of the state to its proper end. As was written in *The Figure of Beatrice*,

> Where this romantic adoration exists, there this proper intellectual investigation of it ought to exist. The clearest possibility of this Way, and perhaps the most difficult, may be in marriage... '[H]ero-worship', and

> even more sentimental states, are only vaguer and less convincing images of the quality which this love is. They are often foolish, but they are apt also to have that kind of sincerity which may, one way or another, become fidelity to the image or to the principle within and beyond the image. One way or another this state is normal; what is not yet normal is the development of that state to its proper end.[99]

**NOTES**

[49] Williams. Unpublished, undated poem addressed to Phyllis. 'A Letter'. Circa 1942.
[50] Interview with Phyllis McDougall.
[51] Williams, *Beatrice* p. 16.
[52] Williams to Phyllis. Unpublished letter; 17th of August, 1938. The private collection of Mrs Phyllis McDougall, as are those below.
[53] Williams to Phyllis. Unpublished letter; 17th of August, 1938.
[54] Quite probably her separating husband "Billie".
[55] Although ungrammatical, he appears to be adopting a colloquial tone for emphasis.
[56] The *Dictionary of National Biography* suggests that Storey might be Mr Thomas Story (1670?-1742), an Anglican who read law and entered a Chambers in Carlisle. He underwent a conversion to Quakerism in 1689, and became a close associate of William Penn.
[57] Williams. Unpublished, undated. Probably circa 1938/9.
[58] Williams *Arthurian Poets*. Introduced and edited by David Llewellyn Dodds. (The Boydell Press, 1991.) Introduction. p. 12.
[59] Williams. *The Region of the Summer Stars* Dodds, p. 123.
[60] Phyllis was staying in Middleton-on-Sea, West Sussex.
[61] Williams. Unpublished, undated. Probably circa 1938/9.
[62] Williams. Unpublished letter to Phyllis McDougall, March 1940
[63] Williams. Unpublished letter to Phyllis McDougall, circa 1941. Hadfield quoted from this on pp. 200, 201, of *Exploration*, but omits to note that the poem is in fact a letter in the form of a poem to Phyllis. It begins "then / suddenly a little daemon sitting in my ear / whispered: "it is a long time since by night / alone, and dreaming of myth, you wrote to Celia."
[64] Williams. Unpublished letter to Phyllis McDougall. 1st July 1941.
[65] Cavaliero. *Poet* pp. 60, 165. Shideler prefers to deal with it under the label of 'energy' - *Theology of Romantic Love*, p.240.
[66] Williams's dots.
[67] Williams. Unpublished letter to Phyllis McDougall, 11th of February 1940.
[68] Williams. Unpublished letter to Phyllis McDougall, 26th of January 1940.
[69] Cavaliero, Introduction, *Letters to Lalage*. pp. 7,8.

[70] Williams. Unpublished letter to Phyllis McDougall. Maundy Thursday.
[71] Interview with Mrs Phyllis McDougall; 21st February, 1992.
[72] held at the Wade Collection at Wheaton College Illinois.
[73] There were a whole series of tensions that accumulated and may have affected him. The pressures of the war, anxiety about London where he had left Michal and Michael and his lecturing at Oxford, nominally on *Comus*, but actually on chastity.
[74] Williams. Unpublished and undated poem amongst the papers of Phyllis McDougall.
[75] He is aware of his capacity for it;

> It's perhaps as well, though tiresome, that I shouldn't send you another cheque today. But I wish I did a few things, not even lecturing to a large and clamorous audience, which is hardly how I should describe my present - give me as much joy. This is as beautiful as it is proper; and I cannot be sufficiently grateful. It is one of the more exquisite results of love. You will say I talk too much of it; no, indeed; I do but soliloquise to you, and to whom but one's wife should one soliloquise.
> 21st November 1944.

[76] C. S. Lewis, commenting on Williams's style in the novels: "The L.C.M. between Dante and P. G. Wodehouse is a difficult thing to hit, and I'm not sure it's a good thing to aim at." Unpublished letter, The Wade Collection. 23rd September, 1937.
[77] Williams, Letter to Michal, unpublished letter, The Wade Collection. 11th of August 1941.
[78] Letters to Michal, 29th July 1940.
[79] The colour of her hair is dictated primarily by the poem's theme of corn and bread, and 'lady' is related to 'hlafdige' which means loaf-kneader. Taliessin. 'Bors to Elayne: on the King's Coins'. l9. Dodds p. 53.
[80] Letters to Michal. 28th of October 1944.
[81] Letters to Michal. 11th of April. 1945
[82] Letters to Michal. 29th of November 1944.
[83] Williams. *Beatrice* p.7.
[84] *The House of the Octopus*. (Edinburgh House Press, 1945.)
[85] Letters to Michal. 5th of December 1944.
[86] Letters to Michal, 17th of February 1945.
[87] T. S. Eliot makes a link in the review between Williams's Rosicrucian expertise and the lure and obscurity of Dante's allegorical and anagogical style.

> Mr Williams, is a catholic student of the occult. It was almost inevitable that he should sooner or later turn to the interpretations of Dante, who above all the great poets chooses to bury hidden meanings, layer beneath layer, under the surface of his verse. These occult meanings, consistent with themselves through the whole of Dante's life work, from the *Vita Nuovo* to the *Paradiso*, Mr Williams finds focused in the single figure of Beatrice.
> 'Times Literary Supplement', 24th July 1943.

[88] T. S. Eliot. 'Times Literary Supplement'. 24th July 1943.
[89] Letters to Michal, 16th November 1944.
[90] Letters to Michal, 19th of October 1944.
[91] Letters to Michal, 9th of June 1943.
[92] Letters to Michal, 17th February 1945.
[93] Letters to Michal, 27th November 1944.
[94] Letters to Michal, 6th of May 1943.
[95] Letters to Michal, 11th November 1943.
[96] Letters to Michal, 15th October 1943.
[97] Letters to Michal, 7th November. 1944.
[98] Letters to Michal, 8th of May 1945.
[99] Williams, *Beatrice* pp. 15,16.

# *To Michal from Serge*

*Letters from Charles Williams to His Wife Florence 1939 –1945.*

Edited by Roma A King Jr.
The Kent State University Press, 2002.

**Reviewed by Glen Cavaliero**

Writing to his wife from Oxford in November 1944, Charles Williams reported that he had been lecturing "on the Disintegrity and Vulgarization of the Intellect as shown in the *Dunciad*"; he then went on to admit that he had not read that poem until a week or two previously. "When my letters to your sublimity are discovered by an American professor in years to be, they will be a great give-away of my literary reputation." The remark is playful, but there is evidence elsewhere in this collection that he was serious in hoping they might be read by posterity. Michal Williams herself prepared a selection from them in the late 1950s, and provided a short Preface which "may give them angles they had not thought up" - "they" being the Oxford University Press who in the event declined to publish the book. Writing to me in September 1959 she reiterated that the project had been her husband's wish, "possibly as an act of vindication."

It is Professor King's contention that this is what these letters amount to, and his Introduction emphasises that these are love letters that demonstrate the lasting influence of his wife upon Williams's poetic and theological inspiration. He points out that they "were obviously written hurriedly and often under considerable stress… The manner, thus, becomes part of the meaning." His account of Williams's state of mind under the conditions of a wartime separation is sympathetic enough to spill over into the footnotes which show a maddening tendency to refer one back to previous ones which are liable to land up in the Glossary. As a result of this excess of zeal your reviewer often found himself in as irritable a state as poor Williams regularly confessed himself to be in these touchingly human outpourings.

If Professor King is correct (and I think he is) as to the centrality of Florence Williams in her husband's life, none the less one is aware of a writer under enormous emotional strain. The shadow of his tormented love for Phyllis Jones continues to hover. Williams appears to be trying to placate Michal, reassuring her again and again as to what had been, for her, a devastating betrayal of her place in his life as his inspiration and his muse. These letters accordingly oscillate between comfortable domestic chat on the one hand, and on the other, outbursts of impassioned, not to say contorted, professions of unaltered love and, virtually, of adoration. One cannot but wonder how far she relished being addressed as "Your Sublime Serenity" (she was a passionate, impulsive woman) or as "Your Excellency" and so on. However, it may have been a case of a game between them: such matters are private between lovers, and there are plenty of more ordinary endearments to redress the balance. Moreover, the shrewd and perceptive Michal Williams, sardonically sceptical about her husband's female admirers, who reproved him in his more effusive moods for being "smarmy", is likely to have gauged the precise level of sincerity when such verbal flights occurred. It is the more regrettable that she should have destroyed her own side of the correspondence following his death.

These letters should be of great interest not only to Williams scholars but also to historians. Whereas Michal had remained in their Hampstead flat, at the outbreak of the Second World War Charles had been uprooted from the London surroundings and routine that suited him so well; his subsequent sense of deprivation is a continual undertow in his letters. They give one a vivid sense of the numberless small domestic annoyances that are the universal product of a state of war. They make us aware of food shortages, of dislocation of travel arrangements, of cramped temporary accommodation. And always, in letter after letter, there arises the question of money and its short supply. There is nothing here about the beauty or romance of Oxford: Williams resented being there, and for all the sense of intellectual activity that he records one might as well be hearing about Crewe. Even the Inklings get scanty notice, and as late as September 1944 he can only name ten people whom he really knows. Above all he misses the company and ministrations of his wife:

> How...can I translate into words an ache in my heart and genitals?

> No. You will say these are letters to "a man's idea of a woman" - what an illumination that remark was!

Illuminating for Williams's readers likewise: not the least interesting thing about these letters is their revelation of just how vulnerable and complex was their author's idiosyncratic humanity. And whatever else they may tell us about him, they show that at heart he savoured domesticity, however undomesticated his intellectual and imaginative concerns may have been.

They also tell one a certain amount about the composition of the books that Williams was writing at this period, For example, we learn that the final chapter of *The Forgiveness of Sins*, which gave him so much trouble, was supplied at the request of his publisher, so as to swell out the book to a marketable size. Ironically, two of his finest books, *Witchcraft* and *All Hallows' Eve*, were regarded by him with dislike – at any rate while he was engaged upon them; he refers to the latter as "that abortion of intelligence which is supposed to be a novel." But this was a mere eructation of temporary spleen. Similar outbreaks occur with reference to other people: indeed Williams displays at times a positively morbid sensitivity. "You can't imagine how I dislike people's *faces*. Only the conventions of years of social behaviour stop me… shouting at them." Yet at the same time we follow his anxious attempts to achieve a working relationship with his tempestuous teenage son, at that time living with him while starting a job at Basil Blackwell's bookshop. But even while one may applaud his continued friendliness to Gerard Hopkins and Fred Page (both of them instruments of his wretched unhappiness at the height of the crisis over Phyllis Jones), the letters are really at their most enjoyable when Williams gives rein to his caustic sense of humour. One becomes aware at such moments that his romantic idealism was always under the guardianship of the quality of disbelief.

Above all, what *To Michal from Serge* makes clear is just how vital to him was his belief in himself as a poet and in his function as a propagator of an accurate romanticism. Even when the letters are at their most distraught, that conviction holds firm. It is the more poignant, therefore, that Charles Williams should have

died just when the recognition that had hitherto eluded him was beginning to be his. The University authorities bestowed an honorary degree, and with the termination of the war in sight he could look forward to a modicum of fame and a resumption of domestic tranquillity. He was full of plans for future books; even so these letters are less informative about the writer than they are about the man whose vulnerable inmost self perhaps his wife alone could understand.

Her own account of their first meeting provides a fitting conclusion to the book. In the typescript she gave to me following our first meeting in 1955 those bleak closing words "I did not go to the crossroads" are followed by the single italicized sentence

*Pledge we to meet anew at Sarras gate.*

Those words were regrettably omitted from the text that was published in the summer of 1995, in the 78th number of the Charles Williams Society Newsletter. Unhappily their absence is perpetuated here. It is the more unfortunate in view of Professor King's championship of the sovereign role that Florence Conway played in her husband's life. All admirers of Charles Williams must be grateful for his labours over such a handsomely produced and interesting book. For by means of it and them one can no longer regard this unique Christian apologist and poet as a remote figure, but as one in whose joys and sorrows one is allowed to share.

## Editorial Policy

The Charles Williams Society's Newsletter and Web site have two functions. Firstly, to publish material about the life and work of Charles Williams. Secondly, to publish details of the activities of the Society.

Contributions to the Newsletter are welcome. If you wish to submit a contribution, please take note of the following:

- Submissions should be sent to the Editor, preferably on floppy disc; otherwise by email attachment to: Edward.Gauntlett@down21.freeuk.com.
- Submissions on paper should be typed double spaced and single-sided.
- All quotations should be clearly referenced, and a list of sources included.
- Submissions of just a few hundred words may be hand written.
- The Editor reserves the right to decide whether to publish a submission. Usually the main article in any issue will be a paper previously read before the Society; in most cases such papers will be published as received, with little or no editorial input. Other submissions may be edited.

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