ISSN 1752-1866

The Charles Williams Quarterly

No. 127 Summer 2008

www.charleswilliamssociety.org.uk

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 magazine and may attend the Society's meetings which are held twice a year. Facilities for members also include a postal lending library and a reference library housed at The Centre for Medieval Studies in Oxford.

Officers of the Society

President: The Most Reverend Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury

Chairman:
Dr Brian Horne
Flat 8, 65 Cadogan Gardens
London, SW3 2RA
020 7581 9917
brian.horne2@btinternet.com

Secretary:
Revd Dr Richard Sturch
35 Broomfield
Stacey Bushes
Milton Keynes MK12 6HA
01908 316779
charles wms soc@yahoo.co.uk

Treasurer:
Mr Stephen Barber
Greystones
Lawton Avenue, Carterton
Oxon OX18 3JY
01993 841219
stephenj.barber@btinternet.com

Librarian:
Dr Brian Horne
Flat 8, 65 Cadogan Gardens
London, SW3 2RA
020 7581 9917
brian.horne2@btinternet.com

Membership Secretary:
Revd Dr Richard Sturch
35 Broomfield
Stacey Bushes
Milton Keynes MK12 6HA
01908 316779
charles wms soc@yahoo.co.uk

CW Quarterly Editor:
Mr Edward Gauntlett
21 Downsway,
Whyteleafe
Surrey, CR3 0EW
020 8660 1402
Edward.Gauntlett@down21.freeuk.com

Contents

Charles Williams Quarterly No. 127 Summer 2008

Reading groups

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

The Charles Williams Quarterly

No 127 Summer 2008

From the Editor

This issue is dedicated to Stephen Medcalf and contains some appreciations and a reprint of his review of David Llewellyn Dodds's edition of CW's Arthurian poems in Boydell and Brewer's "Arthurian Poets" series.

I once asked Stephen about what he had written and got an evasive sort of reply. In these days of research statistics and the insistence on university staff publishing ever more (and ever materially thinner) books and collections of papers Stephen was a bit out of time. He sometimes remarked on books that he had *started* to write, and there must be many chapters of unfinished works from which anyone looking to prepare a posthumous volume might pick; and the papers he did publish are all illuminating and filled with his sharp insights and connexions. In the CW Society people may remember his "Objections to Charles Williams Part One" published in the newsletter in 1984; but researchers will scour the archive in vain for part two which, in spite of desperate pleas and rending of garments, was never submitted. Perhaps he wasn't disposed to spend the long solitary periods necessary to produce great academic tomes with which to bolster his reputation; he was, I think, much more a Socrates than a Plato and so placed more value on discussions with colleagues and students, ideally over a glass or two. At lunch not so long ago he was drinking a pint of cider and suddenly remarked, with the air of one who has come to a very satisfactory conclusion: "Now that I've retired, I think I shall have a pint of cider with my lunch every day." Cheers, Stephen, and thanks for everything.

Society News & Notes

Richard Sturch Talk

The Secretary gave a talk called "The Fascinating World of Charles Williams" on May 25th to a reading group at St Paul, Minnesota, which had just been reading *All Hallows' Eve*. It was followed by a lively period of questions and discussion.

He also visited the Eugene, Oregon offices of Wipf and Stock, discussing their recent reissuing of three books by Charles Williams, and the possibility of adding to the list.

Charles Williams Society Conferences

- **4 – 6 July 2008** (Friday to Sunday)

Charles Williams and his Contemporaries at St. Hilda's College, Oxford

The conference will be opened by Grevel Lindop on the evening of Friday 4 July and end after lunch on Sunday 6 July. Among the topics being offered are papers on '*Dorothy L Sayers and Charles Williams', 'Charles Williams as Publisher', 'The Place of the Lion', 'C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams and Poetry',* and '*Charles Williams and the Nuptial Mystery.*

If time allows we hope also to use the occasion to honour three of the Society's most distinguished literary figures: Anne Ridler, John Heath-Stubbs and Stephen Medcalf – two of whom died within the last year.

There will also be a small exhibition of items from the Reference Library and, if permission can be obtained, Saturday evening will be given over to the playing of a recording of a programme on Charles Williams produced by Ruth Spalding for the BBC in 1961.

- **18 October 2008** (Saturday – St Matthews, London)

Concord Room, St Matthew's Church, Westminster from 10.30 a.m.
In the morning Stephen Barber will give a talk on Charles Williams's Literary Criticism and this will be followed in the afternoon by a reading of *The Myth of Bacon*.

Stephen Medcalf 1936-2007

(An Obituary published in the Church Times and reproduced with the permission of the author)

Those who were fortunate to discover, behind an almost formidable exterior, the richness of mind and spirit of Stephen Medcalf will never forget him. As one of Iris Murdoch's most brilliant pupils at Oxford - and the other was his life long friend A.D. Nuttall, whom he outlived only six months - Medcalf might have spent his scholarly life in those cloisters. His path was set, however, among the first generation of brilliant men who were forging new groupings of inter-disciplinary studies at Sussex University. That place gave him the latitude to teach English Literature from its first beginnings to the writers of our time, among whom he found a friend in William Golding.

Who would not have been fascinated to sit at his feet in a course studying English literature in parallel with astronomy? He edited, and contributed to, a book about the late Middle Ages. He edited, or was entirely at home with, authors ranging from G.K. Chesterton, Dickens, Tolkein, P.G.Wodehouse, Chaucer, Lancelot Andrewes and above all T.S. Eliot. He had great swathes of their works by heart. His *magnum opus* on the religious background of Eliot was, perhaps inevitably, never finished. Insights from it, and from the whole range of his encyclopaedic knowledge, adorned his articles for the Times Literary Supplement, and elsewhere. He spoke at many conferences here and abroad, finding a congenial setting in his later years at Harlaxton. Adept in Hebrew and Greek, he was at his ease teaching the classics.

What a tutor to have in your formative years! Those students who were not dumbfounded by the depth and range of his learning have carried his influence into their maturity. More than one spouse has caught the delight in his conversation from their partner. A solitary, he had a number of Godchildren, and, famously, one young lady whom he found as a baby of a few hours on a bitter February evening in a phone box, owes him her life. Like the rest of us, she mourns a man whose

intellect was a shining sword, sheathed in a gentle compassion. There are stories of his rescuing trapped sheep from ditches, and birds from churches, to which I can add that, with surprisingly gentle fingers, he picked up worms marooned on tarmac or paving stones, and returned them to the nearest soil.

His last holiday abroad was in June this year with a group of close friends enjoying the hospitality of George and Margaret Villiers in their villa on the island of Andros. They were reading Euripides' *Ion* in the original tongue. He travelled much, but he also went into hiding three times a year, making a retreat, perhaps with a friend or two, a special book under his arm.

The happiest day of his life, he told his friends William and Harriett Wyndham, was a visit on January 26th 2006 with the Kipling Society to Burwash church near Batemans, where Rowan Williams officiated. Addressing the question of whether Kipling was a believing Christian, the Archbishop quoted an article by Stephen (on 'Horace's Kipling' published in *The Renaissance Quarterly* for 1995) where he spoke of the leeway needed by a creative thinker in relation to theologican exactitide. They conversed, and afterwards corresponded.

Gabriel Josipovici, long his colleague in the English Department of the University of Sussex, plans to gather together all his publications into a volume. He left a great deal unfinished. and died with his prodigious mental powers at their height. However, he knew he owed his latter days to the skill of the surgeon. Over a decade ago we were driving past a little village church under the Downs and he asked if we might stop. He started by showing me favourite treasures, and then knelt to give thanks for having just survived a triple heart bypass. I have a vivid memory of him there, at prayer beneath sunlight flooding through the great transept window.

We were all to share another fruitful decade of his enriching company. Almost a hermit in his neglect of himself; though on occasion he enjoyed the good things of life -- his eye was always on the far horizon. Much of the time alone, his chosen church was packed for his funeral, and so will be the Memorial Service they plan at his University. The Christmas Carol Service he organised there every year was one of the great events of their calendar: wonderful singing of the choicest

music studded by readings familiar or unknown to most of us, and at the end Stephen himself, with a speaking voice he could use as Rostropovitch played the cello, to illumine and make clear the darkest passages.

If ever a person followed St. Paul's counsel: 'whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, ... think on these things' it was Stephen Medcalf. We all knew he was a great man - we realise now how much we cared for him. He was indescribable, unpractical, enthralled by the glories of our literature, on fire with his faith. I suspect he was a saint.

ADDRESS FOR ST. ANNE'S LEWES ON MONDAY 1ST OCTOBER 2007 AT 2PM.

We have lost a very remarkable man. Stephen Medcalf did not belong wholly to our time. He would have made a magnificent Prior of Lewes Priory, or a distinguished don of Merton College in the 18th century days of residential scholars. Halls of Residence, High Tables where the conversation flows with the port and great minds parry with deep philosophic argument, these would have been, on occasion they were, natural ground for Stephen. A failing, he admitted it to me the last day we were together, deprived him of honours, comforts, and extensive publications his range of learning deserved: he called it idleness. He was in his element teaching, and the spark of young and thirsting intelligences around him brought out his best. More than one ex-student has told me they owed more to him than to all the other professors they had known. My friendship with Stephen, sprung from our mutual habit of attending the 8 a.m. Service here every Sunday, and his coming back to breakfast, starting with a grace sometimes Medieval, sometimes in Hebrew, enriched me beyond measure. It led to several collaborations: two in this church, more at the Harlaxton Symposium where he became a most welcome speaker. I hope his untimely death will have left papers we can retrieve for publication. The Times Literary Supplement will

be the poorer for the lack of his contributions. He helped me with papers for the Christmas issues of the Church Times. Our last outing together was with the Sussex Historic Churches Trust to Etchingham. Although he was evidently ill, he declared he had enjoyed it.

For all that prodigious knowledge, which he was always happy to share, Stephen was a simple man. It was he who taught me to pick up worms if they were struggling on the street and put them with delicate care into the nearest soil. It was, he told me, something St. Francis always did and I shall do it till the end of my days in his name. He was deeply distressed by the death of a little cat that had befriended him, for, like all saintly people, he loved animals. He was not the easiest person to accommodate in our crowded lives, but he enriched all those who made space for him.

Above all, he was a holy man. I shall miss his quiet footfall as he came early in all weathers into this church, having climbed a hill that was nearly too much for him. After his inevitable cough had subsided, he sank into prayer. He was a strong swimmer in those waters, and we followed in his wake. Of one thing we can today be quite sure: he is now entirely at home.

In fact, I caught a glimpse of him when I woke on Sunday morning. He was striding into this church with a vigour we have not seen of late. His face, his whole being, was radiant with light.

Pamela Tudor-Craig

FROM OVID TO ELIOT – A TRIBUTE TO STEPHEN MEDCALF.

(This piece will also appear in "Seven" and is published here with the kind permission of the author.)

Stephen Medcalf has had moving and perspicacious obituaries written about him in a string of English newspapers. The intention in this short article is not to repeat them. Stephen's intellectual legacy, his essays on Golding and Chesterton are well known; his regular articles in the Times Literary Supplement were celebrated; his always conceived but never birthed, magnum opus on TS Eliot, much talked of and anticipated.

As a man and friend , Stephen was an enigma; complex and idiosyncratic. My memories of him, like yours if you knew him, will be distinctive.

Stephen had a lumbering thoughtful gait. Like a merchant ship under sail being wafted through a high swell in a benign sea. It was a reflective focused arc of transit. You could spot it among the busy ants from hundreds of yards away. The quality of his walk , like the quality of his mind, was different from most.

He would suddenly heave to, and loom in through my office window. "Ashenden" he would almost bark, "have you read Barrow on the cosmological anthropic principle?"

The light of friendly battle was always in his eyes. And then we would talk about the latest book on cosmology, or New Testament criticism, or Golding or Wodehouse, or Ovid or Chesterton.

We became friends when we discovered our mutual love of Charles Williams. I'm not sure if I ever managed to persuade Stephen that the *Descent of the Dove* was the most perceptive piece of 'spiritual theology' ever written, and he nearly despaired of convincing me of the supreme beauty of the Taliessin Cycle. Though when he lifted his voice and got into the declamatory rhythm, the mist became drenched with shafts of light. I almost saw what he saw.

You will have read about his inspirational lecturing which it was so hard to take notes from, and his office- a mixture between bird sanctuary and a study in filing and book-stacking anarchy. But there other places he made his own; in particular the creation of a carol service where the readings were culled from sources both known and loved and impossibly obscure and potent. And one of the texts then he would always read. Without shame he always reserved the best and most dramatic reading for himself and then turned the chapel into a theatre where in candlelight he would whisper and declaim with a passion, vividness and commitment that took unwary onlookers completely by surprise. The scholar became declaiming bard.

Striking was Stephen's love of the authors whose experience of God as a journey of the heart had been intertwined with their powers of creativity or scholarship. Like CS Lewis, he was deeply distrustful of modernism as a cultural and intellectual project. He would take great delight in any discussion of dredging his prodigious memory for an apt quote, and if it was in Latin, Greek or Anglo Saxon, so much the better, and if it was, then he would wait for you to top it, place or translate it with a quizzical and contented gaze.

I think his last words to me were "it's about time you invited me to dinner again!"

The Rev'd Canon Dr Gavin Ashenden,

University of Sussex.

BOOK REVIEW BY STEPHEN MEDCALF
ARTHURIAN POETS: CHARLES WILLIAMS, EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY DAVID LLEWELLYN DODDS. PUBLISHED BY BOYDELL & BREWER

(This review was first published in the Spring 1992 edition of The Charles Williams Society Newsletter)

David Llewellyn Dodds' edition of Charles Williams' Arthurian poems offers us, along with *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*, and Dodds' own good but necessarily too brief introduction, three splendid gifts:

firstly, a (slightly trimmed) reproduction on the cover of David Jones' more or less contemporaneous (1940) and gorgeous water colour "Guenever" in the Tate Gallery, which shows Lancelot breaking into the chapel in Sir Meliagrance's castIe, where among her wounded knights the naked Guenever is waking;

secondly, of Williams' earlier Arthurian poetry, all fifteen previously published but never collected poems, with fourteen of those never before printed, making up a large part of the sequence *The Advent of Galahad*;

and thirdly, six fragmentary but substantial poems from what would have been published after *The Region of the Summer Stars*, had Williams lived.

The last is the best. All the fragments explore regions which Williams had hardly touched before, and bear witness to a development of new life in him in his last years. One can even be taken as a whole poem, though it would probably have been part of a longer one: it describes Bors riding to celebrate Pentecost at Camelot, and cheering himself as he goes with a song about the renewal of love in the constant marriage between himself and Elayne, which evidently reflects what we know from his letters was happening between C.W. and Florence Williams in those years. The new life in Bors' marriage anticipates some new consummation in the story of Arthur's court, probably, as Dodds suggests, the Pentecost to which Bors is riding is that when Galahad comes to sit in the Perilous Sell, and the quest for the Grail begins. The poem is closely connected with another and finer but

more fragmentary one in which Taliessin, also at the beginning of Pentecost, is told by Merlin to expect that his poetry is to be surpassed and superseded by Percivale's. There are closely similar lines in the two poems about the new day, which in the Taliessin poem run:

> Down the hill from Caerleon by the Roman road
> the two lords went; the May moon
> was bright, but chilled already by unseen morn;
> the clearness of the sun thrilled through the clearness of the moon,
> but unratified. The texture of the trees freshened,
> and the herdsmen were up in the meadows. No walls
> parted then Caerleon from the country...

The sense of anticipation and newness is thrilling, confirmed in the lines about the trees and herdsmen, by a suggestion of actual observation of something happening in nature (experienced firewatching in Oxford, perhaps?) such as is almost totally missing from *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*; there it is replaced by a powerful suggestion of the supersensuous such as in the earlier part of this passage from the new poem is given by the clearness of sun and moon.

Perhaps there would have been more suggestion of natural observation in the unwritten third volume: on the other hand, it is clearly not the new Poetry of Percivale, which Taliessin describes in lines that are fine in an altogether other way:

> Dull should I have been not to have known by the Throne
> a greater than I, a more than Virgil's peer.
> Dry with meaning, high leaning to heaven,
> is Percivale's voice, speaking such dialect of stone
> as the granite towers use in that land beyond sea
> where they talk and stand and move on the Trinity's business.
> The air of that world is always thunder in this
> and the print of Percivale's voice is the hint of the thunderbolt.

It is tempting to think that Williams had T S Eliot in mind when he wrote this. Eliot announced more or less contemporaneously a similar ambition to get beyond poetry - "The poetry does not matter" - in the last three *Quartets*, and the mention of thunder makes one think of the last section of *The Waste Land*. But

probably the temptation should be resisted. This new Taliessin poem had the title - though Williams cancelled it – *The Calling of Galahad*. Evidently the idea is that even the most perfect of Poetry of the imagination, such as Taliessin represents, will not suffice to describe the achievement of the Grail, which must be left to Percivale. The poem which in *Taliessin Through Logres* described Galahad's entry into Carbonek was put in the mouth of Percivale, although its style is not really distinguishable from the first supersensuous style of Taliessin himself. But it must be presumed that the "dialect of stone" is the style that Williams would have tried to write if he had come to the achievement of the Grail, although he might have taken hints for it from Eliot.

But Taliessin himself is shown with a changing consciousness in another of the fragmentary poems, “The Taking of Camelot”, in a way which is a relief to those who feel (as I do) that in *The Region of the Summer Stars*, notably in "The Queen's Servant", he, and perhaps Williams with him, was becoming too confident of his image as King’s Poet, and degenerating from the splendour of *Taliessin Through Logres* into something uncomfortably close to pompousness. When he takes Camelot, Taliessin kills King Cradlemas. Doubtless Williams echoes here his own complex feelings about the war: for though the killing seemed unavoidable, Taliessin feels guilty. More strangely, his guilt brings new life in a way that one would expect rather from Kierkegaard's kind of Christianity than from Williams':

> Alien and inalienable, rife with terrors,
> rose in the king's poet's heart the interior life,
> read, dreamed, thought, and yet unlived
> in Caucasia, in Gaul, and the antechambers of Byzantium.

Curiously, just as there are kinds of new life in both the new Bors poems and “The Taking of Camelot”, although of very different kinds of new life, so in both *The Calling of Galahad* associated with the Bors poem, and “The Taking of Camelot”, there is a new sense of the going on of events in time. The particular detail of this kind in “The Taking of Camelot” is associated for me with the putting of David Jones' "Guenever" on the cover of these poems, for it raises the question whether Williams in his Arthurian poems and Jones in his Arthurian Poems and paintings are doing the same kind of thing.

In “The Taking of Camelot” there are lines

> They came to Verulam at dawn;
> there, under the ruined church on the hill
> they watered and changed horses - ate, drank;
> prayed, laughed.

which bring to the mind of anyone who knows St Albans the continuity of its history, and the way in which that continuity was caused by the presence on the hill above Roman Verulamium of the church placed there to mark the place of the martyrdom of St Alban, round which the mediaeval town later grew. This is an effect, connecting the world of the Arthurian poems through history with the present day, that is very rare in Williams' Poetry - confined otherwise, I think, to the suggestion in “Taliessin in the School of the Poets” that Taliessin enters the school "by Paul's and Arthur's door". If one knows a fair amount about Williams' life, one understands that this links Arthur's world with St Paul's cathedral, and St Paul's suggests Amen House beside it, and so Williams' work there and the Masques by which he ritualised and enchanted the place. One does not need to know that Williams was brought up in St Albans to feel the impression of continuity in the lines from “The Taking of Camelot”.

It is odd that Williams did not use that effect in the Arthurian poems: for his novels are full of it, conspicuously in relation to St Albans in *Descent into Hell*, and London in *All Hallows' Eve*. Evidently he wanted the world of *Taliessin Through Logres* to be as self-contained as it is. But David Jones complains of a consequence of this self-containedness in his essay on Williams, “The Arthurian Legend", in his *Epoch and Artist*. He misses, he says, "nowness". "Somehow, somewhere, between content and form, concept and image, sign and what is signified, a sense of the contemporary escapes, or rather appears to me to escape." To illustrate this sense of the contemporary, he instances a phrase from James Joyce which works a little like the lines about Verulam. Joyce describes Suffolk Place in Dublin where the Norsemen held their "things" or councils as "Northmen's thing made south folk's place." Jones praises him both for metamorphosing "Suffolk Place", so as to reveal the Northmen's "thing" hidden in it, and for finding a "Suffolk Place" to metamorphose. Williams, he implies, although he had the power to do this and could have shown the world of Arthur hidden in the pre-

sent day, did not find "the actual, the intimate and the now", in which to show it hidden. Consequently, readers find not enough to hold them so that they can become familiar with the strangeness of the Arthurian world and of Williams' interpretation of it.

There may be some truth in this (although Jones himself is uncertain) to the extent that readers are apt to feel if they come across the Arthurian poetry before having been caught by something else in Williams' writing, that there is a key which they need before they can begin to respond to the poetry. In contrast, some might feel, David Jones' picture on the cover, although it is quite as full of symbolism and Arthurian reference as Williams' verse, has a kind of initial invitingness . Even if you do not know the story behind it, it suggests, you can make up your own story, and it will be more or less good enough. No doubt that is why it is on the cover. But if you open the book, will you not still find that the style of the verse asks that you discover both the right story and the right interpretation. Robert Conquest long ago, in a much more hostile review of Williams' poetry than David Jones', praised the talent that made it, but said that what it had made was totalitarian. This is the wrong word. But I take this self-contained quality, this absoluteness, to be what he means. In our age, which has made freedom its central value to the extent that critics are continually making statements which imply that there are no constraints on interpretation at all, that a poem means anything a reader wants it to mean, such absoluteness is a considerable bar to response.

It is a problem which is highlighted by David Llewellyn Dodds' remaining gift to us, the earlier Arthurian poems. These are not nearly such good poetry as *Taliessin Through Logres*. Some are so slackly written that it requires considerable expenditure of energy to keep one's attention on them, and indeed are only valuable because they show in what ways the later poetry is good. Compare for example the magnificent last verse of the "Prelude" to *Taliessin Through Logres*:

> *Good is God*, the muezzin
> calls, but lost is the light on the hills of Caucasia,
> glory of the Emperor, glory of substantial being.

With its predecessor:

Wise is the Moslem law;
but lost is the light that lay on the snows of Circassia,
glory of the Emperor, glory of substantial being.

They are equally knotty and esoteric in their symbolism. But the first line has become much more precise and removes the need to guess at why the Moslem law is wise, but inferior to Christianity in its perception of the glory of the incarnation of God. The second line, by omitting the unnecessary "that lay" and the distracting "snows", suggests much more powerfully that the light is the light of divine glory. The supersensual quality of *Taliessin Through Logres* can be seen emerging.

Nevertheless, some of these weaker poems reveal significances which make one realise that one has made no sense at all of lines that depend on one's knowing them in *Taliessin Through Loqres*. Take the opening of "The Star of Percivale":

By the magical western door in the king's hall
the Lord Percivale harped ... "

As it stands in this poem the magical western door means very little, and makes a feeble start to the poem. Williams remarked that he liked the title *Taliessin Through Logres* because it sounds romantic and vague and is almost classically exact. This is what he was aiming at throughout the book. But this door is not exact, is too vague, is too vague even to be weakly romantic - until one discovers what it is from one of the best of the early poems, "Taliessin's Letter to a Princess of Byzantium". It is the door of creation, beyond which was darkness,

.... always darkness, save
at midnight on great feasts a light shone forth
but from no moon or sun, as if the world
looked through itself at some antipodes
of day, where vast hills hovered cloudily,
pinewoods wind-shaken, but no wind to feel
and noiseless waterfalls from unseen heights ...

Through it Balin went to deal the dolorous blow; from it the Grail, if it is ever achieved, will be brought.

All this gives an important context to what is said in “The Star of Percivale", and

to a line in "The Crowning of Arthur"

> At the door of the gloom sparks die and revive

and one re-reads those poems with greatly increased insight and therefore enjoyment. But until those poems were rewritten, or at least published in their weaker form, one had sometimes to walk in reading the published poems on steps that were not there.

Williams' later Arthurian poetry, to say it again, is oddly self-contained. Rather rare readers find themselves at home in it from the start, needing no key: rather more have found a key in the novels or other writings before they come to it. But by what intuitions could one be introduced to it, that would bring it more easily than it usually is taken to be, under T S Eliot's canon: "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood"? Some such intuitions can be found by following up the suggestion of Jones' Guenever, and comparing the descriptions in words which both Jones and Williams give of Guinevere. Williams' is brief, in "Taliessin in the Rose Garden":

> Hazel-lithe she stood, in a green gown;
> bare against the green, her arm was tinged
> with faint rose-veins, and golden flecked
> as the massed fair hair under the gold
> circlet of Logres; on one hand was the ring
> of the consort of Logres; deep-rose-royal
> it drew the rose-alleys to its magical square.

Jones' is much longer: it is in his great meditation on sign, art and sacrament, *The Anathemata*, and describes Guinevere at the Midnight Mass of Christmas, over eleven pages. But the greater part of this concerns her ritual posture at the altar and the purple robe like a chasuble adorned with golden bees and furred, which descends to her buskins of Andalusian leather furnished with polar ivory brought to her by the Celtic sea-god. The only parts of her own person that are revealed are, as with Williams, her fair hair against the golden circlet

> "So that the pale gilt where it was by nature palest, together with the pale river-gold where it most received the pallid candle-sheen, rimmed the

crescent whiteness where it was whitest."

Her brow, white as the moon, and "her neck-shaft of full entasis, as though of Parian that never ages, still as a megalith, and as numinous". She is in fact seen as like the moon, and like a "chryselephantine column (native the warm blood in the blue veins that vein the hidden marbles, the lifted abacus of native gold)" that "leaned, and toward the Stone".

There is an evident contrast in their treatment of human flesh. Jones wants to relate it to ritual, to its clothing, to myth, architecture and stone, Williams also to ritual, but to stress that naturalness in colour of both the clothing and the flesh itself and its likeness to roses. In the case of the human body, Williams does begin from naturally observed reality, even though presently he wants to relate it to the blood of sacrifice and other things. Here, he has found "the actual, the intimate and the 'now'", in the fleshliness of the human body, which interests Jones less than the making of architecture and ritual. This can be seen even in the watercolour “Guenever”. Guenever's naked body is in itself awkwardly sensuous, not glorious nor symbolic: it is made allegorical because the bed on which she lies suggests an altar, and her bedroom is a chapel, where the bodies of her knights beside hers suggests the sleeping dead of all wars throughout history.

There is here a general contrast. Both poets are visionaries concerned with the universe as sacramental. Both want to show us, as Williams put it in *Witchcraft* how a thing being wholly itself may be laden with universal meaning. Both see an analogy between meaning in words and meaning in sacraments; both follow through meaning in both words and sacraments to see God's meaning in everything. It is not a vision easy to convey in the present day, which is dominated by what Jones called the utile, by the practical and functional, and only accepts the kind of meaning with which Jones and Williams were concerned in the form of that individual, subjective and totally free interpretation of which I have already spoken. Williams' understanding and expression of it came from the way in which the human body is naturally meaningful, either generally, as informed by spirit, or particularly in the glory with which lovers see it. Jones' understanding came from art itself, in the analogy between the artist and the minister of a sacrament in making matter meaningful.

Jones' way was probably, in a civilisation whose artefacts are more dominated by function than symbol, the more difficult to use in writing and painting, as indeed he says in his most anthologised poem, “A,a,a, Domine Deus”. Oddly enough, this may make what he did produce more accessible to modernists who even without religious sensibility sympathise with his artistic struggle. Williams seems not to have had to struggle, in the writing of his poetry, to retain his vision. In "Bors to Elayne: on the King's Coins", which begins and ends with the meaning of Elayne's hands, he unhesitatingly condemns the elimination of meaning in a functional world:

> the brood of carriers levels the good they carry.
> We have taught our images to be free; are we glad?

One penalty he paid was isolation. His capacity to see symbol where others see bare matter is one of the grounds of what David Jones calls "his flavour, the atmosphere which is powerful, ‘strong and strange' as Mr Lewis says." It is continually too strong and strange at one point or another even for us his admirers, as even for David Dodds, who objects - wrongly I think - to the use of oil from the ground for Arthur's crowning, because it comes from near Caucasia and because of its multiple uses, in one of the new fragments:

> The gold mined in Caucasia, of a kind for kings,
> thrice-refined in the City; the sacred oil
> from wells also by Caspian, stuff of fertility,
> lubricant to every function, for the unction first
> of the king's crowning...

A greater penalty was in his erotic life, in the painfulness of trying to recognise what he saw in human and fleshly beauty and reconciling it with other human relationships. I again think David Dodds wrong in appealing to Lois Lang-Sims' *Letters to Lalage* for evidence that he did not in his life keep his "doctrine homogeneous and consistent". It seems to me that this is exactly what he did, and that it was this which caused unavoidable strains. There are suggestions in the early Arthurian poems of how much the world of Taliessin had its source in the pains of his relationship with Phyllis Jones. Thus what appears in "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass" as pentecostal fire:

the festival of flames
fell from new sky to new earth; the light in bands
of bitter glory renewed the imperial lands.

appears in its earlier form, "Taliessin's song of Lancelot's Mass", as the glory of Christ's resurrected body, between resurrection and ascension, but coming through Celia, his name for Phyllis Jones, upon Circassia, the earlier form of Caucasia as the realm of human flesh:

And from the general vision
for my sole heart to confess
there grew beyond the altar
a Byzantine princess.

The altar stood between us
of our Lord's great courtesy
and the awful light spread round us
that we had bidden to be.

'Twixt advent and departure
of pierced and shining hands
the bitter Caelian glory
renewed circassian lands.

This earlier form bears witness, not only how much the renewal of his sense of divinity manifested in humanity owed to Phyllis Jones, but also how much he presumed that such a manifestation of glory might be bitter. There is admittedly something unbalanced in this earlier sense of what can appear through humanity in intense love. The Princess of Byzantium in this Mass seems to play the part, with Williams' approval, which he condemns in the later poetry in "The Star of Percivale":

Lancelot's gaze at the Host found only a ghost of the Queen.

And in the latest poetry, in "The Daughter of King Brandegoris", what remains of this kind of relation between love and the Mass is Bors remembering Elayne,

when sideways tossed your eyes
as we knelt to the Consecration; the Eucharist
holds this no less; there is never a kiss

lost there, whatever the cost to us.

The Princess of Byzantium, idolised in *The Advent of Galahad*, is removed in the published poetry, her place as Taliessin's beloved being taken by Blanchefleur, sister of the awesome figure of Percivale, never idolised, but herself someone who subjects her life to sacrifice and substitution.

It is, of course, a difficulty in symbolic writing like Williams', which has meanings in various directions and on various levels, that the more one stresses any one way in which it works in relation to "the actual, the intimate and the now", the less one does justice to some other. Thus as Williams moves, as he seems to, towards a historic connection between Arthur's Logres and modern Britain, such as that in the lines about Verulam, he puts a strain on the relation between the world of the poems and ideal humanity, experienced by lovers who see their beloved ablaze with heaven. This is already happening in the published poetry, and is one of the reasons for a difficulty which Dodds ponders, that one cannot quite rearrange the poems in *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* to make one sequence, as C S Lewis tried to do so in *Arthurian Torso*. For in *The Region of the Summer Stars* Williams (perhaps under pressure from the academic scholarship of Tolkien, whose poem objecting to the untroubled anachronism of *Taliessin Through Logres* is in Humphrey Carpenter's *The Inklings*), becomes more conscious and conscientious about history. Thus in *Taliessin Through Logres* those who know something of the vision of God but deny coinherence are represented by the Moslems, who did not exist for many generations after any possible historic date for Arthur; in *The Region of the Summer Stars* their place is taken by the Nestorians. More subtly and more importantly, the last line in the last but one poem of *Taliessin Through Logres* runs: "Logres was withdrawn to Carbonek; it became Britain."

In the preface to *The Region of the Summer Stars*, Williams renders this into prose: "Logres is overthrown and afterwards becomes the historical Britain, in which the myth of its origin remains." This is a very historical rendering, which might tempt one to think that Britain was once Logres, but now everything that was Logres has been removed from it. Williams tries to prevent us from thinking this by adding "in which the myth of its origin remains". This phrase must be

more or less equivalent to “to Carbonek”: that is, Carbonek is that spiritual place in modern Britain where, as in "Northfolk's thing made Southfolk’s place" in Joyce’s Dublin, you should find a myth of origin. That interpretation fits perfectly well if you consider the Arthurian world not as a historical myth, but as a myth of what the human body and mind is: Carbonek does spiritually and psychologically correspond to the romantic, poetic and chivalric ways in which we have imaginative access to the Grail. Yet if, as in the prose rendering of *The Region of the Summer Stars* you historicise the myth, you find that the presence of Logres in modern Britain, and therefore the meaning of Carbonek, has too much to do with a bare remembering of something past. How inadequate that is you may see if you consider Williams’ lovely remark in his life of Queen Elizabeth apropos of the commercial sense which Elizabeth shared with Shakespeare: “The English, a nation of shopkeepers, are a nation of poets, of whom a number of the best came literally out of shops. They, like the angel of the Apocalypse, set one foot on the known and one on the unknown.” So, Logres is a present part of Britain.

Perhaps it is important to include among the Arthurian cycle of poems, to support this sense of the presence of Logres, not only some of *The Advent of Galahad*, but also the one body of Williams’ verse in which he shows one of the places of his Arthurian world in the external world of the twentieth century. It is not Logres he shows but P’o – l’u, and the poetry is some of his latest, the haunting, distressing but triumphant play *The House of the Octopus*. There would be further advantages in including this play. It would more than answer Dodds’ feeling that in *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* P’o - l'u is not as successful as in its first limited appearance in the early “Mordred's song of the Kingdom”. Moreover, in it two themes which Williams intended to treat in his Arthurian poems, but never did, are brought forward. First, Anthony the missionary priest in the play is, as it were, Arthur continuing and winning his moral struggle over the dilemma expressed both in the epigraph to *Taliessin Through Logres*, and in “The Crowning of Arthur” and later:

> the king made for the kingdom, or the kingdom made for the king?

And secondly, the figure of the Flame in *The House of the Octopus* fulfils what

Williams meant to be central to the Arthurian cycle but actually only included by allusion, his understanding of the unseen and mysterious workings of God's providence expressed in the invisible knight Garlon. Like the newly printed fragments of *The Calling of Galahad* which must have been written more or less contemporaneously with it, *The House of the Octopus* manifests the uncanny vision of the world which Williams acquired as he drew near his death.

Stephen Medcalf

1992

Editorial Policy

The Charles Williams Quarterly and the Society's Website 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 Quarterly are welcome. If you wish to submit a contribution, please take note of the following:

- Submissions should be sent to the Editor in 'Word' format on disc or 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.

Copyright

Registered Charity No. 291822