

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

NO. 15, AUTUMN 1979

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY 1980

22 March 1980: This will be a full Society meeting combined with the London Reading Group to complete the reading of War in Heaven.

31 May 1980: A.G.M. Speaker Dr Erik Routley.

6 September 1980: One day Summer Meeting in London. Details in next Newsletter.

Society meetings are held at 2.30pm at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1. (North Audley Street is the second turning to the right, south, off Oxford Street, going from Marble Arch towards Oxford Circus; after Grosvenor Square it becomes South Audley Street. Another convenient access is from Park Lane.)

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

The Society's Lending Librarian brings a selection of library books which may be borrowed by members.

MEETINGS OF THE S.W. LONDON GROUP OF THE SOCIETY

For information please contact Martin Moynihan, 5 The Green, Wimbledon, London SW19. Telephone: 946 7964.

LONDON READING GROUP

22 March 1980, Saturday at 2.30pm at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W1, (for directions see above). This will be combined with a Society meeting reading War in Heaven. It has not been possible to arrange further dates for reading group meetings on Saturdays and Sundays because of difficulties in providing accommodation for the meetings. Any suggestions, please, to Richard Wallis.

REPORT OF THE OXFORD SUMMER CONFERENCE (Friday and Saturday 7 & 8 September 1979)

On Friday 7 September we assembled outside the Bodleian Library in Oxford at 2.30pm, some members having taken the opportunity before that of visiting the CW exhibition in the Divinity Schools (prepared with much loving care by Charles and Alice Mary Hadfield). Guided by Charles Hadfield we walked past the Sheldonian and Blackwells and the place in the Broad marked by a cross where Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley died at the stake. Turning to the right we went past the Martyrs Memorial in St Giles and crossed the road to the Taylorian Institution to see the hall in which CW lectured. Further on we passed the Eagle and Child where the Inklings used to meet and walked on to the O.U.P. in Walton Street where we were received by the London Publisher, Sir John Brown and his staff in the Printers Library. Sir John had arranged for us to see the casting of a piece of Fell type, to meet several of the staff who had been contemporaries of CW and to look at a display of CW's books formerly published by OUP. We were entertained to tea, and, after expressing our appreciation and thanks to Sir John Brown for arranging such an interesting visit, we left just before 5pm to our hotels or to London.

The following day, Saturday, we met at the Bodleian Library after lunch, and made our way to St Cross, the church where CW worshipped and where he is buried. We later assembled in the Curator's room at the Bodleian and, prior to reading a shortened version of Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, were addressed by Martin Browne, President of Radius, the Religious Drama Society, and an actor in the original production. He spoke

of CW as a dramatist and particularly of his theatrical instinct, and illustrated this with references to Cranmer and other plays such as Grab and Grace for which he seemed to have a special affection. Following the talk, members enjoyed themselves reading Cranmer, finishing about 5 pm to disperse to our homes.

The whole Conference was voted a great success and we were very pleased to have Joyce Hines from New York with us for the 2 days.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to:

John E Morrison III, 510 Manatuck Blvd., Brightwaters, New York 11718, USA

Dr Elaine R Jefferts, Shaw Island, Washington, 98286, USA

Colin McCarragher, The Old Vicarage, 46 The High Street, Fareham, Hampshire

Kim Taplin, Field Cottage, Old white Hill, Tackley, Oxford

Stephen Barber, 28 Crouch Hall Road, London N8 8HJ

Ursula Grundy, 15A Thurloe Road, Hampstead, London NW3 5PL

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

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

Secretary: Rev Dr Brian Horne, 11b Roland Gardens, London SW7 (373 5579)

Treasurer: Philip Bovey, 102 Cleveland Gardens, Barnes, London SW13 (876 3710)

Membership

Secretaries: Jenet and Philip Bovey, address as above.

Lending

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

Editor: Mrs Molly Switek, 8 Crossley Street, London N7 8PD (607 7919)

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CONCERNING ALLEGORY by George Every

I would like to enlarge on something that I said in conversation to one or two people at the Oxford meeting. In The Allegory of Love, on pp 46-8 of the paperback edition which I have at hand, C.S.Lewis contrasts allegory with symbolism. He allows that in such writers as Hugh of St Victor mystical interpretation was not limited to Scripture. "Of the three conditions necessary for a sacrament, the first is the pre-existing similitudo between the material element and the spiritual reality ... Quod videtur in imagine sacramentum est. (The sacrament truly is what is seen in the symbol). On the literary side the chief monument of the symbolical idea in the Middle Ages are the Bestiaries." He goes on to say that he would "distrust the judgement of the critic who was unaware of this strange poetry, and who did not feel it to be wholly different in kind to that of the allegories." I do not deny the difference. The question is of its nature. Lewis goes on to insist that in the Vita Nuova Amor is "only a personification". This may be a valuable warning, but when in note 2 on page 48 he remarks:

that "Dante himself, while parading four senses, makes singularly little use of them to explain his own work", he misses the point that the author's intention is by definition the literal meaning, in Scripture or anywhere else. Dante could not have given allegorical, tropological or anagogical interpretations to The Divine Comedy, any more than Isaiah or Ezekiel, Ovid or Virgil, could interpret their own prophecies. But as the meaning of Virgil to Dante is not limited to what Virgil meant when he set out to write, so Dante's Virgil for Dante's readers may have more meanings than for Dante himself. This is possible and natural because Virgil was a poet with a precise vision of universal meanings in things who wrote of more than he knew. So was Dante, and so also was Charles Williams when he said to Eric Mascall, who cited him in no.8 of this Newsletter: "I have never thought of that before, but that is certainly one of the things it means." He spoke of a particular line, but the same thing is true of all his poetry and of all his symbols.

Byzantium, for instance, was not simply a symbol of Heaven that he had chosen to use. He believed that the imperial court was a symbol of the Heavenly court, and London of the celestial city, and Logres of another mystery in English history. These were to be precisely rendered in poetry and then interpreted by readers according to their capacities. T.S.Eliot was wont to insist that others might know what his poems meant much better than he did. He wrote of what he had encountered and of the impression this made on him for others to decipher a meaning. I believe that Lewis did the same on occasions when he transcended his own intentions and wrote down more than he knew, but he did not want to do so. This was part of his dislike of living in an age of uncertainty, of what made him think of himself as a survivor, a dinosaur. He had the strange idea that "of the dark conceits of Donne there was one correct interpretation of each and Donne could have told it to you". He may have been right about poems written by Alexandrian men of letters. He was certainly wrong about the way they read Homer and the Bible.

I met him first in a disputation where he objected to my presentation of the need for Christians to learn critical sensibility from F.R.Leavis and others. Charles Williams contributed to the same series an article on "Sensuality and Substance", reprinted in The Image of the City. I am not sure what I had to do with the invitation to do this, but I thought that what he said about D.H.Lawrence was on the side of encounter and exchange between Christians and unbelievers. C.S.Lewis and I became friends, but continued to spar about literature. I saw him as a glossator, a useful commentator on texts whose historical background escapes us. As a friend of Charles Williams, with whom the poems were discussed, he is an authority on their literal sense. The difficulty is that the symbols whose meaning Williams pursued had a reality outside himself in the history of a great tradition. This Lewis understood, but in a limited way. In his own field in the sixteenth century and directly before, he was a master, but in pursuit of the background to his main theme in the early chapters of The Allegory of Love he was subject to some of the same difficulties that make mystical interpretation so hard for academic theologians. He knew that it was possible to see a sacrament in anything, and that St Anselm might preach a sermon on a boy playing a game. But he did not notice that those who read Latin poetry as well as the Bible in that way might think it natural to write more than they understood. I think that is why Tolkien insisted that The Lord of the Rings was not allegory. He had no intended allegorical meaning, but any one else might find one there as Charles Williams helped us to find one in Byzantine and British history as well as in the Bible.

Taliessin through Logres was first published forty-one years ago, The Region of the Summer Stars - thirty-five. How, I wondered, does Logres fare in the 1970s? Working in a busy public library I was aware of a steady turnover of children's versions of Arthurian legends, of what some might call a more-or-less lunatic fringe of Glastonbury lore and legend and the occult, and of a number of adult books, fiction and non-fiction, with "Arthurian" titles. When, within a few weeks last year, two serious-looking non-fictional works arrived from the publishers, I decided - not to hunt but to notice what was newish and popular (and - who knew - whether there was any sign of the King's Poet's style)

Continuously popular is Geoffrey Ashe's The Quest for Arthur's Britain (first published in 1968 by Pall Mall Press and thus technically just outside my 1970s date-line), which has chapters by experts on archaeological discoveries at Tintagel, Glastonbury, in Wales and especially Cadbury which was beginning to be seriously considered as Camelot. Mr Ashe refers to The Figure of Arthur and in a chapter on modern Arthurian literature has three sympathetic paragraphs on Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars. And in his Camelot and the Vision of Albion (Heinemann 1971), Mr Ashe, starting from Cadbury-Camelot, ranges from a titanic Arthur, via modern Zionism, Gandhi and Lenin to visionary myth-makers, particularly Blake but with several references to CW including (via the French revolution and Confucius) a glance at Po-L'u.

1973 brought The Age of Arthur: a history of the British Isles from 350 to 650 by John Morris (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1973): 665 pages of straight political and social history, beautifully written and clearly presented; no myths, no later characters than Kay, Bedevere, Percival and Tristram (who are 'real'); this Arthur is the traditional unifier, and restorer of Roman order (which, says the author, could have been still longer preserved had not most rich and powerful Britons fled.)

Equally readable is Richard Cavendish's King Arthur and the Grail : the Arthurian Legends and their meaning (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1978). The author is scrupulous about proper attribution of different myths and versions, though his interpolated comments can occasionally confuse, as where he writes (dissatisfyingly to a CW admirer): "Lancelot stands for Adam, the imperfect man, and Galahad for Christ as the Second Adam, or man perfected" (p170); a casual reader could miss that this refers specifically to the Vulgate "Queste del Saint Graal". He is sceptical in an appendix on "Miss Weston and A.E.Waite", sensitive to development of character (particularly Dinadan and Palomides) through from the earlier tales; and after detailed treatment of these and of Malory has half a page for Spenser, Dryden, Wagner, Swinburne, Tennyson and thus to "our own century ... John Masefield, Charles Williams, T.H.White, Rosemary Sutcliffe and Mary Stewart".

Mary Stewart's The Crystal Cave (about Merlin - Hodder & Stoughton 1970) and The Hollow Hills (about Arthur - Hodder & Stoughton 1973) are long, rich feasts for readers who enjoy a straight-forward, well-researched historical novel. They are two parts of a trilogy; the third The Last Enchantment is promised soon. Written like them as a first-person narrative of Merlin but otherwise in striking contrast, Robert Nye's Merlin, published in 1978 by Hamish Hamilton, is not concerned with convincing historical background or character-development. His Merlin is "the first pornographer" as Mr Nye put it in a fascinating article (The Times, Sept 16, 1978) explaining his sources and intentions for this eruditely derivative and boisterously lewd account of Merlin's conception and life as a half-demon: the French texts "behind" Malory plus the sadism Mr Nye finds "suppressed in Malory, T.H.White and

Charles Williams." Failed anti-Christ, born on Christmas Eve, christened immediately through the inefficiency of his Uncles Astorat and Beelzebub and his father Lucifer, who turn up in various guises, always with strings of scabrous bad jokes and dirty stories, throughout his life, he looks back from his imprisoning tree, one side green leaves, the other flames. And his narrative, as well as Welsh and French sources, includes some familiar snatches: the tree is in Broceliande, a forest with great roots in the sea and no paths in it; he wonders if all his thoughts are tides produced by action of sun and moon, and remembers the streets of Logres ... snow falling ... lying in smoky drifts down the porphyry stair of St Paul's. He finds "order in the growing of a wood ... even in the chaos." He watches Lancelot and Guinevere - as voyeur of masturbation and onanism - in a rose garden. Like Taliessin (whom he does not mention) he spoke riddles as a baby and as in early Merlin-legend his voice was heard from the womb. Looking back: "my original country was the region of the summer stars." But his life-story is full of fashionable relish at violence and perversions and this Merlin loathes Arthur: "the creep".

In contrast with this tour-de-force of learned obscenity in which ordinary people and human qualities are swamped by the devilish total recall is T H White's The Book of Merlyn, first published in 1977 by Collins but written in 1940 as the fifth and final volume of The Once and Future King and unrevised by the author. A passionate, relentlessly didactic pacifist tract-for-its-time, it is leavened by kindly magic, natural history and the loving relationship between Merlyn and Arthur, now old. The beautiful illustrations of clothed animals might be more suitable for a children's book. One needs to have read the earlier books, preferably also their first versions. Like CW, T H White is probably a taste - or an extreme distaste. If, like me, you loved the young Wart and his metamorphoses you will probably find the adventure with the grey geese as fine and moving as anything T H White ever wrote.

Merlin is clear winner as central character for recent Arthur-derivative novels. Runner-up seems to be Lancelot. Peter Vansittart's Lancelot (Peter Owen 1978) owes nothing to Chrétien or his successors; he is anachronistically, Ker Maxim, a late fifth-century Roman-Briton looking back in old age on battles under Artorius - taciturn, gluttonous and beastly: Gwenhaver was a whore; in the background is a mysterious occult figure, unbounded by time, called "He"; Badon was a defeat, the "best people" fled to Armorica (the author acknowledges a debt to John Morris's Age of Arthur q v). The Saxons had won; Ker Maxim himself had prestige and power as a map-maker and his one hope is that the writing of his friend Gildas will survive. The atmosphere of decay and despair is powerful, the narrative as gripping as Mary Stewart's, but this is far from Lancelot's more familiar medieval ambiance.

Even further is that of Walker Percy's Louisiana Lancelot (Secker and Warburg 1977) (baptised Lancelot Andrewes "after the Anglican divine ... shouldn't it have been King Ban of Beuvrick's son, though? ...) who tells his story in a "nuthouse" to a psychiatrist-priest-figure Harry-Hotspur-Northumberland-Percy-Percival-Parsifal. He has had two wives and two daughters with all-American names, and a son who "tired of women before he was twenty". His troubles stem from one wife's adultery with an un-wizardly Merlin. There is no Arthur but this is the only one of these novels to pay any attention to the Grail; this Lancelot's life has been a quest for an Unholy Grail, "the sweet secret of evil", he seeks a sense of sin in a Southern milieu as far removed from the more familiar American "Camelot" (by Hollywood and Broadway out of Kennedy's White House and T H White) as it is from anything familiar to British-orientated "Arthuriana".

Worlds away from such introspections are the last two novels I have found popular. Our Man in Camelot by prize-winning crime-writer Anthony Price (Gollancz 1975) is a compulsive thriller in which the CIA and KGB vie with each other and clever natives of Arthur-country (mostly Berkshire) to track down a site for Badon. No pretence of truth is implied but a good deal of Arthurian and archaeological scholarship is easily slipped

in among the chases and murders. Equally cool, urbane and racy is Naomi Mitchison's To the Chapel Perilous (first published in 1955 but reprinted by White Lion in 1976 and very popular with library-users) in which a pair of cub-reporters from "The Camelot Chronicle" and "The Northern Pict" report on the several Knights of the Round Table who, in Malory and Tennyson, found the Holy Grail. The satire is delightfully light, the Malory-quotes wring the heart as when T H White does them (particularly for a CW reader when Galahad sends word, as he does in several reports, to bid his father remember of this unstable world) but there is a sadness in the naive young damsel-reporter's final decision to believe that "they lied to me in Sarras", though she sees that the story is no longer hot, the medieval world is disappearing with the Grail-legends; the time is ripe, as the newspaper-tycoon (a splendid figure with swishing black tail) puts it, to move on to ... "another line ... Culture .. Music .. Architecture .. Sculpture .."

A Renaissance of very different cultural connotation is the business of my last new book, the one which really set me pondering how Logres fares in the 1970s. Arthur is certainly central in King Arthur King of Kings by the Professor of Celtic History at the Sorbonne, Jean Markale (published 1976 by Gordon and Crenonesi, transl. 1977 by Christine Hanch). Championing modern ethnic minorities' emancipation and independence he postulates his model (ancient) Celtic society - a loose network of self-sufficient communities accepting a supreme leader only at a time of crises. Inevitably conflict with Roman imperialism produced an Arthur, and all the ancient Arthurian material is grist to the Professor's mill: "the only true difference between epic which conveys reality through myth and history which conveys the same reality through events, is an epistemological one. History is epic presented in a supposedly objective way, while epic is history presented in a subjective way" (p14). So it can all go in! He declares that the evidence for an historical Arthur (a Celt against the Romans) is as ample as that for Jesus Christ. Naturally nothing later than Malory is relevant to his Arthur-figure which, like that of Guinevere and others, becomes a curious compound of different authors' attitudes. But he cites Scott's Ivanhoe as evidence of English acceptance of Norman Conquest, and seems to assert that the Round Table was not mentioned before the thirteenth century, though he also quotes Wace's "the Bretons tell many tales of it". On his last page, after a section "Arthur's Legacy" of very great interest to anyone concerned to understand justification in Marxist terms for eg Flemish, Basque, Breton, Welsh, Scottish, even Red Indian nationalism, he ends with the modern Celts' need for a King "before anything can happen ... It is our right and duty to waken King Arthur ...".

Would he come, I wondered, would he even waken? And I was reminded of one who made no claims as an historian, though he too went to "call and install King Arthur": CW's Merlin who, to the near-slumbering young Taliessin "breathe[d] on his eyes, saying: "Do not wake, king's poet.

Fate is for you to find but for us to make,
Dream - or see in dream ... "

It seems clear that there is certainly a current interest both in fictional and non-fictional works about Arthurian themes and archaeological and historical research. Arthur himself keeps a low profile in adult fiction, but Merlin can give scope for occult fancies. Guinevere and Elaine are of less interest than Nimne: clearly it is the magic and historical background rather than situations that appeals at present. But nowhere does there seem much interest in the Grail, which seems generally regarded, if at all, as a regrettably - diminished development of "cauldrous of Ceridwen." Taliessin should be heard again on the subject in modern Logres: could we hear from American members about popularity (and sales) of CW's poems in the States, now that they are in print there?

P.S. Since writing the above I have discovered Percival and the Presence of God

by Jim Hunter (Faber 1978) and must retract my remark about finding "not much interest in the Grail" in recent English novels. And yet ... well ... the Bleeding Lance, Cup and Attendants are here in a fine tense scene recalled by a most sympathetic young Percival. Anguished by his failure to ask the Question he has given up his search for Arthur and seeks only the means to heal the Fisher-King; but significantly he has not really prepared, mentally or spiritually, for the second chance to ask. His infantile apprehension of God - when things go well "God is kind", when things go ill "God wasn't there" - is well balanced by his response to the cleverly-used symbols of painted Gospel-figures and the Rood ("totem of Arthur") and by his involuntary feelings of fulfilment in physical satisfaction: fighting, riding or just mending the roof - above all, inevitably, in love-scenes with Whiteflower, the perfect lady for so chivalrous and youthful a Percival, ironic while dependent and an infectiously pragmatic theologian, though the old abbot of Percival's boyhood, with his exhortations to "observe silently", gets Percival's retrospective blame, as his mother and dead tutor have his uncritical devotion.

Beautifully structured with clever control of repetitions and thematic echoes, this is, of all the books, perhaps the one on which I would most value CW's comments. Would he find the Love-scene's imagery sacreligious? Would he, indeed, find the chapel scenes and Percival's praying convincingly religious? The Presence of God is as elusive as Arthur for this Percival, and whether either or both are finally lost to him his subjective self-centred attitude to the Unasked Question is perhaps appropriately symbolic of the ambivalence, uncertainty and disorganisation of received "religious ideas" (rather than theoretic theology) in 1978. But perhaps that might have been thought applicable in 1945 also ... or 1215 ... or 518 or thereabouts.

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Members might be interested in the references to CW that are in They Stand Together, letters of C S Lewis to Arthur Greeves 1914 - 1963, editor Walter Hooper, published by Collins 1979. There is reference to A Place of the Lion on p.479, and on page 500 a description and appreciation of CW.

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