

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 21, SPRING 1981

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

2 May 1981 : In the Principal's lodgings of Brasenose College, Oxford, starting at 2.30pm. Rev Walter Hooper will read a hitherto unpublished talk on CW written by C S Lewis, to be followed by discussion and tea. For copyright reasons this talk will not be reproduced in the Newsletter, but will be published as one of a collection of essays in a book to be titled Of This and Other Worlds.

If you drive to Oxford, please leave extra time for parking for it is not possible outside the College. If you come by rail, turn left out of Oxford station, and catch a number 1 bus which runs down the High Street, ask for the Cotte Street stop and you will be within 3 minutes walk of Brasenose College.

6 June 1981 The annual general meeting of the Charles Williams Society will be held at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1. (adjoining the Grosvenor Chapel) on Saturday 6 June 1981 at 2.30.

- Agenda :
1. Apologies for absence.
 2. Report on the year's activities by Richard Wallis, chairman of the Council.
 3. The accounts - to be presented by Philip Rovey, treasurer.
 4. Report of the General Secretary Gillian Lunn.
 5. Report on the Newsletter by the Editor Molly Switek.
 6. Election of Council members under paragraph 5 of the Society's constitution.
 7. Any other business.

Gillian Lunn
General Secretary

The A.G.M. is open to members only. After it has ended at, or as soon after 3.30pm as possible, a meeting open also to non-members will be held, at which the speaker will be Ruth Spalding on 'Some recollections of CW at Oxford'. Questions and discussion will follow, after which refreshments will be available. The Council hopes that as many members as possible will be present and that they will invite friends to the open meeting.

5 September CWS one-day London conference at St Andrew-By-The-Wardrobe church in the City. Details to be announced.

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

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

LONDON READING GROUP

2 August 1981 : This meeting will be held at 1pm at St Peter's Hall, Portobello Road W11. Please bring sandwiches. We will continue reading The Descent of the Dove.

OXFORD READING GROUP

A small group of people interested in reading together Charles Williams' Arthurian poems has begun fortnightly meetings in Oxford. We are meeting alternately at the homes of Anne Scott (tel: Oxford 53897) and Brenda Boughton (tel: Oxford 55589). Anyone who would like to join us would be very welcome.

On Friday and Saturday, 7 & 8 September 1979, the Society held a 2 day conference in Oxford. On the Friday we were the guests of the Oxford University Press and met some of CW's contemporaries who were specially invited for the occasion. Subsequently I wrote to them asking for any personal reminiscences of CW that they might have, and received a wonderful response. Pressure of space in the Newsletter has prevented me including these before but I happy to do so now and feel sure that members will find them interesting reading.

Ena Sheen writes: 'I never actually worked with CW: our paths crossed when I was a very junior member of the Press for eight months only. My main recollection of him ... is of those highly entertaining tea-parties at Southfield House when Helen Peacock attracted a circle of CW, Frederick Page, Gerard Hopkins, and, usually, Phyllis McDougall, and one never knew whether to go on typing and make interuptive noises, or to stop typing and appear to be listening... Conversation was sparkling, and, as I recall, very funny, but, alas, after 35 years I can remember nothing specific.'

Peter J. Burney writes: 'When I joined the staff of the OUP, nearly fifty years ago, I was in my early teens and was a very junior member of the staff in the Private Office of the then Publisher - Humphrey Milford. Charles Williams was already firmly established in the Amen House firmament so it was not surprising that it was sometime before he was aware of the existence of a 16 year-old ex-cathedral chorister!

My duties were such that any involvement with CW was slight; our paths rarely crossed and I was far too young to be part of the CW coterie. However, I still have a vivid picture of him in my mind's eye - tall (to me), thin and gangling, hands thrust into trouser pockets, trousers seemingly always four or five inches too short, never still for a moment, cigarette permanently clamped between lips - usually with at least an inch or two of ash attached which always amazed me, since he gave the impression of a marionette being operated by a frenzied puppeteer. This is not meant unkindly but merely to try to convey a picture of the tremendous volume of nervous energy which was always bursting forth.'

Kenneth Day writes: 'These are but random memories of CW, and I am going back some forty years to recall them. He was one of a trio of outstanding Editors at the London office of the Oxford University Press (Amen House) prior to the Second World War.

I had the honour, as seen in retrospect, to work with Frederick Page, Gerard Hopkins and Charles Williams as the first London Production Manager of the Press. Memories of all three are fitful, but probably most vivid of CW, who at the slightest challenge would thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, hoisting them even further to half-mast, and marching up and down the room - however small the space - declaiming from Milton. It was quite incredible that he could pick up the continuity anywhere in "Lost" or "Regained" and continue until a point had been made.

It was this retentiveness, added to some extraordinary feats on the part of members of the team, that contributed so much to the success of the original Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, which contrary to any other appearances was, in fact, an Amen House project and wholly prepared there. Other members of the team were Frederick Page, Gerard Hopkins, Phyllis M Jones, and soon to be joined by Alice Mary Smyth.

I was only present in the same room - off the back of the hall at Amen House, and at the side of the Library - when delivering messages or providing necessary materials on request. CW was usually perched on a window ledge in a jack-knife position, not, one would have thought, particularly comfortable, but he obviously found it stimulating to the memory. I was at the time in the Publisher's private office, under the control of Helen M Peacock. My brief

more mundane affair, and I was much their junior. I suppose I regarded all these senior men with some awe. But I often went to them with problems and found them approachable and friendly and only too ready to give advice.

A general meeting ground for the: all was the Library at Amen House where Phyllis Jones was librarian. That was in every sense their common room. CW could be as light-hearted and even boyish as he was intellectual. He had a happy turn of phrase and gave an impression of buoyancy or even ebullience (as someone remarked). That could have been his faith coming through in his joy of living. In spite of the occasional lukewarm review he had no doubt that recognition would come.

I did a great deal of amateur acting with several clubs in London, one being the OUP Dramatic Society. CW was a member. He was always interested and, as can be imagined, never backward in offering advice.

The London business was evacuated to Southfield House, a lovely mansion in Oxford, after the war began in 1939. CW came with the business and he had his office in the bathroom. On one occasion he was discovered having a good read in the bath! And of course he was always reading wherever he was, on a bus, walking across the High Street, or indeed anywhere else. It was a wonder that he was never knocked down on the roads. ...

Then came the Inklings about which Humphrey Carpenter has written so colourfully; and CW's closer association with the University Church and his lecturing in the University.

Then our ways parted, but CW was someone I remember well and whose individuality and ability I shall always admire although I was never very close to him.'

Irene Smith writes: 'My earliest recollection of Charles Williams dates from the middle thirties when I first worked for the Oxford University Press at Amen House, as a junior in the Correspondence Office. One of my tasks was to sort the incoming post and to deliver it to individual members of the Press and to the various departmental heads. There were sometimes as many as five or six of these deliveries each day (including Saturday mornings) and consequently I became acquainted with all the people I met on my 'rounds', CW being one of my most interesting and colourful characters.

He occupied a very small office at the end of a narrow corridor not far from the publisher's (then Humphrey Kilford) huge room, with its Adam ceiling and fireplace and very highly polished and slippery floor. On one occasion in my early days at the Press I well remember the Publisher's Secretary and I gazing in horror as poor CW almost measured his length on that floor when rushing in, as usual, to a "summons" from the Publisher for a consultation.

CW shared his small room with Frederick Page, as quiet and retiring as CW was outgoing and always happy to chat or discuss whatever was uppermost in his mind at the moment - even with me, a modest junior. There was just about sufficient space in their room for the two desks, placed directly facing each other, their two chairs, wastepaper baskets (which CW invariably missed, consequently there were always bits and pieces all over the floor!) - three walls lined with shelves full of books - as well as piles of books on the floor and all round the two occupants - a huge window taking up most of the fourth wall - a window I don't think I ever saw opened. CW smoked a lot and there was always a haze about his office. As I knocked and entered the room he would spin round in his swivel chair, which to me never looked safe, at the same time tipping the chair back at an alarming angle, often propping his feet

up on the desk, and in that slanting position would raise his eyebrows (much exaggerating his rather shaggy appearance) and regard me with a questioning look. When particularly roused over some piece of correspondence he would get up and fling himself about the small space his office afforded, usually upsetting a stack of books or files or sheets of paper or proofs - though in spite of this apparent chaos he would always manage to find what he wanted.

When wishing to consult a colleague he would tear around the maze of corridors, dash up the stairs several at a time, often humming to himself and almost sending flying anyone in his path. On one occasion I collided with him round a corner during my early days at the Press, dropping a thick file of papers. He was full of remorse for his haste, helped me retrieve my jumbled collection of post and insisted on escorting me back to his office to help get the papers into some semblance of order, spreading them over the sheaves of papers already littered on his desk. Finally, as we made little progress between us, he phoned the head of my department for help, apologising profusely in his own inimitable way.

CW took a keen interest in the O.U.P. Dramatic Society productions and could often be found at times when rehearsals were getting under way, draping himself over the bannisters of the main staircase in Amen House, or sitting on the stairs, expounding a particular point or theme of his. I remember too he was always generous in his donations when approached with a 'list' for a staff wedding or retirement.

I much enjoyed his sense of humour, and some years later when I became secretary to Mr W.B. Cannon, the Staff Manager, and then to Mr Cumberlege, who succeeded Sir Humphrey as Publisher, CW would always give a cheery wave and welcome and find time to stop for a chat. He was indeed the kind of person one never forgets - a man whom I consider it a privilege to have known and respected, quite apart from his accepted literary genius.'

+ + + + +

COPYRIGHT

Everything in this Newsletter is the copyright of the Charles Williams Society unless otherwise stated.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the Editor.

© 1981