

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 22, SUMMER 1981

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

5 September 1981 : One day Summer Conference in London - see below for details.

28 November 1981 : Glen Cavaliero will talk on Charles Williams and 20th century Verse Drama.

28 May 1982 (Provisional) : AGM

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 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.

LONDON READING GROUP

2 August 1981 : This meeting will be held at 1pm at St Peter's Hall, 59A Portobello Road, London W.11. Please bring sandwiches. We will continue reading The Descent of the Dove.

S.W. LONDON READING GROUP OF THE SOCIETY

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

OXFORD READING GROUP

For information please contact either Anne Scott (tel: Oxford 53897), or Brenda Boughton (tel: Oxford 55589).

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+ C.W.S. SUMMER CONFERENCE, SATURDAY 5 SEPTEMBER 1981 +

+ The Conference will open at 10.15am in a meeting room in the City church +

+ of St Andrew-By-The-Wardrobe (the church doors will be open by 10am). +

+ From 10.30 Brian Horne will speak on The House of the Octopus. There will +

+ be a break for coffee and then at about 11.30 Joan Wallis will speak on +

+ 'Charles Williams and Samuel Johnson - some suggested parallels'. This +

+ will be followed by a break for lunch (please bring sandwiches - coffee +

+ and tea will be available) during which Joan Wallis will lead a short walk +

+ to Johnson's house in Gough Square (to which there is an entrance fee of +

+ 50p). During the afternoon from about 2.30 until about 5pm we will read +

+ The House of the Octopus - would anyone having copies please bring them, +

+ spare copies too. There will be a conference fee of £1 to cover expenses +

+ which should be given to the Chairman on the day. A very warm welcome is +

+ extended to all members, particularly to any from overseas who would be in +

+ England at that time. Guests are also welcome. The church of St Andrew- +

+ by-the Wardrobe is in the City of London, near St Paul's Cathedral in Queen +

+ Victoria Street E.C.4, a few hundred yards from Blackfriars Bridge. The +

+ nearest Underground Station is Blackfriars (on the District and Circle lines)+

+ but Mansion House (on the same lines) and St Paul's (on the Central line) are+

+ both within walking distance. +

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1981 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Society's A.G.M. was held on 6 June 1981 in Liddon House. Reports were presented by the Society's officers, and it was announced with regret that Alice Mary and Charles Hadfield are leaving London and have therefore resigned from the Council and can no longer be hosts to the London Reading Group. Anne Scott was elected to the council as 'out-of-town' member. Following the business we welcomed Ruth Spalding who gave us some most interesting 'Recollections of C.W. at Oxford' which stimulated questions and discussion among members. For those who were unable to attend the meeting the talk is reproduced in this Newsletter.

SECOND-HAND BOOKS

The Society now has a further supply of second-hand books by Charles Williams for sale to members. Unless otherwise stated they are in good condition.

<u>Title</u>	<u>Price</u> + postage and packing
All Hallows Eve	£4.50p
The Descent of the Dove (3 copies)	£4.50p each
The Figure of Beatrice (2 copies)	£6.50p each
The House of the Octopus (2 copies)	£6.50p each
The Image of the City	£5.50p
An Introduction to Charles Williams by A.M. Hadfield	£4.00p
James I (2 copies)	£5.50p each (1 1st edition but poor condition, the other better condition but 2nd edition)
Judgement at Chelmsford	£3.50p
Many Dimensions	£1.00p (rare Penguin, poor condition)
The Place of the Lion (2 copies)	£4.50p each
Religion and Love in Dante	£7.00p (40 page booklet; very rare, this is cost price)
Rochester	£4.00p (1st edition; poor condition)
Seed of Adam (3 copies)	£7.50p each
Shadows of Ecstasy	£1.00p (Faber paperback)
Taliessin through Logres	£7.00p
Victorian Narrative Verse (Ed. with Intro. by C.W.)	£0.75p (poor condition)
War In Heaven	£0.50p (Dennis Wheatley 'Library of Occult' paperback)
War in Heaven	£4.00p (Faber hardback)

Please order from Gillian Lunn but send no money when ordering. On receipt of the book(s) please add the cost of postage (as seen on your parcel) and make your cheque out to 'Gillian Lunn a/c 51053922'.

Gillian Lunn also has some photocopies of the 'Taliessin through Logres' end-paper map by Lynton Lamb, for sale at 50p each plus postage and packing.

Many thanks to members who wrote such nice letters after buying from the last list; the kind comments are greatly appreciated. Gillian Lunn is keeping a list of titles that individual members are hoping to acquire and will let people know if she can get them. Alas! - we mostly seem to want the rare and virtually unobtainable. Please, no more requests for 'The Silver Stair' or 'Heroes and Kings' at present!....

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

Chairman:	Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London W11 3BS (221 0057)
Secretary:	Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL (346 6025)
Treasurer:	For the time being, please send subscriptions to Richard Wallis, address as above.
Membership:	Please contact Miss Hilda Pallan, 179 Makepeace Mansions, London N6 6ES (348 3903)

There was one matter that used to irritate Charles (but he displayed irritation in a most good-natured fashion) and that was when people thought his work needed 'explaining'. It was thought necessary, by some, to have an explanatory note about the play in the programme; Charles reluctantly consented and C.S.Lewis agreed to write it. I sent Mr Lewis's draft to Charles and he returned it with a few alterations, saying in his letter: 'I agree with you about all this explanation, but no doubt the people who want it are right. At least, I don't think they are myself, but I never argue'. Charles and his wife, Michal, came to both the afternoon and evening performances of Seed of Adam, and with typical courtesy he wrote afterwards: 'to say once more - at the risk of boring you - how admirable I thought the whole affair.' He ended with the words: 'I wish there were something else of mine that you could do! Take this as a tribute and not as anything else'. Need I say that I took it literally - as soon as the opportunity came my way.

We transferred the production to a conference at Swanwick. There, again, the play went over very well, and I wrote to tell Charles. He replied on 8 August 1939: 'you will know by now that I hope I shall never go all pompous when I hear of these things being a success, though I do tend to say ... when that magnificent moment of silence comes "we do do it rather well, don't we?" There was no mock modesty about him! It reminds me of a quotation from the Bible (one of many) that he used to relish: 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit - and to us'. Returning to that letter of 8 August, he wrote an important P.S.: 'I understand that if by any chance there is a war I shall be moved to Oxford. I suppose you don't happen to know any small and cheap house near you where three people could take rooms at least for two or three weeks until things straightened out? That is the worst of us family men. This' (he added hastily) 'is not to suggest that you should give yourself any trouble; it is only that you might know some house where they did not want evacuated children ... Well! My parents were in the U.S.A. and my sister Anne and brother John and I were in charge of our home, 9 South Parks Road, Oxford. We sent a cable to our parents setting out the options, and a cablegram came back, sent on to me Post Restante at Sligahan on the Isle of Skye where I was camping at the time. It read: 'Greatly prefer Charles Williams'. That was on 23 August. About a week later, we drove south through part of a very dark night on sidelights. Headlights were suddenly banned. On 3 September war was declared. It was strange that World War 2, the most horrific time of my life, corresponded with one of the most exhilarating experiences: that of having Gerry Hopkins and Charles Williams ('the Lodgers', as they were always called) under our roof for the duration of the war, and, indeed, until the time of Charles's death in 1945: it was a huge, unearned bonus. I have heard it said that Charles was miserable in Oxford and hated being out of London. He certainly disguised it from us; and once, when he had spent ten days in London in 1940 he wrote to me: 'Air-raids are no doubt at present a condition of our fantastic existence, but I find that condition a little trying to work in'.

I do wish I could remember the subjects we all discussed round the table at breakfast and in the evening. Charles was the centre of the conversation but he never hogged it. Christopher Fry, recalling conversations with Charles over bread and beer at the East Gate pub in Oxford, said: 'His small talk was large talk. His large talk was small talk, in the sense that it moved lightly to and fro across the table with the greatest relaxation and enjoyment.' Hugh Ross Williamson described meeting him at a party: 'this enchanting and rather odd man with ... this curious look on his face ... a look of intense searching ... and you suddenly found that you could talk to him about anything!' T.S.Eliot observed of Charles: 'a theological discussion with him was conducted in such high spirits as to become almost a lark.'

Many people, in the Newsletter and elsewhere, have described Charles with great perception but it is perhaps not out of place to record a few more descriptions. My own first impression was of a man who would jump up from his chair and spring about the room, his body moving with unusual agility and delicacy, but also with great bravura, and his agility of mind and its delicacy and bravura were absolutely in keeping. Victor Lucas (who was a member of my company, the Oxford Pilgrim Players, now a Television Actor and a lunch-time lecturer at the British Museum), first remembered Charles, at South Parks Road, 'helping someone roast chestnuts in front of an electric fire.' Victor said: 'The thing I remember most about him was ... his intense and courteous interest in people as individuals. He made Wilkie "(another young actor)" and me feel larger and better than we thought.' He spoke of Charles's fits of coughing as he smoked and of his 'strange accent' (often wrongly referred to as Cockney). Victor, with a very good ear said 'was it an origin of Cockney or was it really a dead forgotten dialect which Chaucer would have recognised? It was certainly unique ... and I've never heard it since.' Living in Hertfordshire, as I do, I occasionally hear an echo of some of his angular vowels, which he pronounced with a curious, slightly grotesque mouthing. I can hear it in my mind when I look at a photograph of Charles, just as I can see his upper lip working with irresistible amusement before he opened his mouth to demolish an absurd statement.

Gerry Hopkins, I think, gave a very accurate, slightly satirical description of Charles: 'I can never forget his personal appearance because it was very personal and very odd. He was extremely thin, tall, and he walked in a very loose-jointed way, like a marionette on the end of a string. When he walked in the streets he ploughed along with his coat tails flying behind him, his nose in a book and a cigarette dangling from his mouth'. Gerry described Charles at O.U.P.: 'His conversation was endlessly enlivening, inspiring, and at times rather disconcerting ... I would be walking down the main stairs and reach the landing to find Charles turning the corner ... Without a word of warning he'd say - "Has it ever occurred to you that the Athanasian Creed is really a mathematical formula?" and from that point on we would talk until nobody else could get up or down the stairs, and that happened daily ... Even the rather austere Milford ... had a passion for Charles, and if he thought that somebody was discussing something with Charles on the stairs, out he would come from his room and join in.'

We, too, had this marvellous experience every day at two meal times (3 at week-ends) and at 9pm when Gerry and Charles stopped writing, and we all listened to the 9 o'clock news and drank tea and afterwards talked.

I have written, elsewhere, about starting the Oxford Pilgrim Players, in the autumn of 1939, a company touring religious drama, with the open-ended slogan 'Plays Any Time Anywhere'. I have told how Charles, one of our Vice Presidents, wrote first of all The House by the Stable to our exact requirements. I only had to say: 'We need a part for Donald, John, Clement, Jack, Margot, Pamela and me' and have a brief chat about the length and subject, and he'd create it. He took ten days to complete The House by the Stable and it was a play that always worked, whether in a village hall, an abbey or cathedral, theatre or school, to coal-miners in the Rhondda Valley, or to people, many of them homeless, in the deep East-end air-raid shelters in E. India Dock Road, where we played it in the middle of the Blitz, at the invitation of an Air-raid Warden who told us he was an atheist.

When we opened with it in Oxford, members of the audience said with the unconscious intellectual snobbery sometimes found in our great Universities: 'It's a splendid play; but of course you couldn't take it to your audiences outside Oxford, they wouldn't understand it.' In fact, I remember a particular East end air shelter on 3 floors, and when we'd given a performance on the top level members of the audience came up to us and said: 'Come on, you must do it to the other lot,' and they took us down below, where many of the audience watched, enraptured, lying in their bunks. They in turn made us go to the layer below (it was like Dante's Inferno). The lowest level was very crowded; children almost jostled us off the 'stage' and there our backcloth was macintosh curtains

in front of a row of lavatories. The audience was wonderful; silent and attentive, except when Hell and Gabriel were dicing for Man's soul and then, as I imagine happened when the groundlings were excited by a Shakespeare play, they anticipated Hell and Angel; when the dice was thrown, and there was a pause, the audience whispered: 'Five' or 'Six', which added to the excitement. (On the other hand, when we did it in the Crypt of St Pauls, a pious lady got up and flounced out, protesting at the wickedness of dicing in God's house)! After a performance to what might be thought a very simple crowd of people, one of our company said to a member of the audience: 'some very clever people say this is a difficult play to understand. D'you think it is?' 'No!' came the answer, 'Anyway, it was the shepherds got there first - before the wise men!' Indeed, it was only 'intellectuals' who ever told us the plays were difficult. In the past few years there have been performances of The House by the Stable by amateurs and professionals, on stage, radio and television, in the U.S.A. (more often there, I think, than in this country), in Canada, Australia, Southern Africa, I think in Japan and on the overseas programme of the B.B.C. for Poland. Sadly, now that it is out of print, there are only a few performances given each year.

The Death of Good Fortune came next, and was one of Charles's favourites. It was on the theme 'All luck is good' or Boethius' words: 'Every lot is good, be it harsh or be it pleasing'. It was written in what Charles called his 'more advanced style'; written because Dick Milford wanted to book The House by the Stable for St Mary's, but said it wasn't long enough on its own. Again, it was Dick Milford who suggested a Pentecostal play and Terror of Light, written in prose, had its premier in the University Church - the first Whitsun play, I think, to be written since the Reformation. And what a tour de force to put Whitsun on stage! As usual, Charles read the play, before it was produced, to the Inklings, and wrote to me as follows - (I was away on tour): 'I was reading it last night to Lewis and Tolkien and the rest at Magdalen, and I became conscious of what afterwards turned out to be their only criticism. The scenes about Mary Magdalene and John need a little toning up or down or something. There are a few phrases which won't do; I mean, for example, the earlier moment when she says she thinks she must go away. It is too much like a drawing-room comedy. And was here and there throughout ... we must keep it on the intellectual and almost abstract level, and I have let it down here and there. Otherwise they all approved, and they thought the Simon Magus business quite admirable. Also Saul of Tarsus'. In another letter he wrote that he was not quite happy about the ending of Terror of Light: 'It is a little more ordinarily devotional than I care for. However, we can always alter it if we can think of anything better'... he went on: 'I am a little worried by feeling that towards the end someone or other ought to have a little brief chat about the Holy Ghost. But I will not have any more piety, and I cannot possibly let them go off into advanced Christian theology.' When I wrote to him from Penzance, reporting on appreciative comments on Terror of Light from a parish priest, Charles wrote back delightedly: 'I have never received a nicer compliment than to be told that Clement of Alexandria would have enjoyed it. I begin to think that among all our ascetics, I, and I alone, upheld the great Alexandrian tradition of humanity. Everyone else has an overwhelming sense of the 'Spiritual' - more proper of course, but there should be a counter-weight.' Charles's wife, Michel, disliked Terror of Light, and Charles himself was dissatisfied with it. He had plans to re-write it in verse, which would have been quite something. Yet like the others, it is a play from which snatches come back to me with great power at unexpected moments. And, it is memorable to other people as well. A couple of years ago, I was researching for a book I am writing, and one wet cold day I wanted to look at some Tombs and Tablets in an Oxfordshire church, but I found it locked. So I went to the Rectory. The Rector, a Canon, didn't look very pleased to see me, and said he was going out, but with the self-absorbed firmness of an inveterate researcher I got my toe in the door and was, rather grudgingly invited in. I was there to investigate a 17th century friend of Bulstrode Whitelocke's but somehow, within 5 minutes Charles William's name came into the conversation. The Canon warmed up: 'I saw a production of a play of his', he said, 'a Whitsun play called Terror of Light, done in Sidmouth in the war'. I told him that was my production and he went on: 'I've often quoted from the play in my sermons. After that the Canon seemed to forget that he was going out, and we had a splendid talk.

Charles also wrote Grab and Grace for the Oxford Pilgrim Players, and a play about witchcraft with the arresting name Frontiers of Hell - but it was not a good play, and had little in it of interest. He also wrote a sermon to be spoken before our production of Henri Gheon's The Way of the Cross, which based on the stations of the Cross, Charles' sermon is an impressive piece of work. /Ruth Spalding read the sermon but for copyright reasons it cannot be reproduced here./

Charles helped me to draft some guide-lines for the company I was running, and one point in it has, I think, a wider application: 'The Company from its beginning has been run on a democratic and co-operative basis ... It encourages a sense of decent responsibility in its members towards each other, a reasonable freedom of courteous criticism and a general method of self-government. This necessarily involves a "hierarchy of functions", that is, that a proper command and obedience rules in all active operations of the company. This hierarchy is not petrified, in other words each person must preside in his proper place and time. Equality of person and hierarchy of office is the general principle...

Charles made a very strong impression on people. Most men and women I knew loved him and were influenced by him. A few disliked him; he embarrassed and disquieted them. Occasionally, I think, he took a mischievous delight in the result of his perfectly spontaneous, but to some people shocking remarks. He would speculate about anything! No subject was taboo because of good manners or because it was thought 'not quite nice' Maybe some of his remarks will take some of you aback. 'Why' .. he pondered, in the company of some intellectuals in Oxford, 'why the Lamb of God? Why was it not the Pig of God?' He said some of the company didn't care for that speculation. He upset a meeting of clergymen by his views on the wrongness of jealousy. 'But Mr Williams' one of the audience protested, 'if I saw a man kissing my wife, d'you mean to tell me I shouldn't punch him on the nose?' 'My dear fellow' said Charles, 'I've no doubt you'd feel like punching him on the nose; I'm only saying that as a Christian you shouldn't'. Charles said some of them didn't care much for that proposition. I remember him speculating as to whether Christ, being true God and true man, went to the lavatory! He could argue a case either way, for he was a wonderful Devil's advocate, and in any discussion where a particular point of view was unfairly stressed or over-stressed he would make the case for the other side. He was a great advocate - for the devil or anyone else. And his strong support for doubting Thomas (whom he brought into Terror of Light) and for honest scepticism was refreshing and heartening.

Charles was never 'familiar' with Almighty God, in a proprietorial sense. Whatever he said was tempered by his profound sense of awe. Yet he was not over-awed, not afraid to speak his mind. If he had been a rich man, he said he would have dedicated a Church to St Thomas, Apostle and Sceptic.

I have quoted elsewhere Gerry Hopkins, who at that time was an agnostic, saying that Charles was the only saint he had ever met - and Gerry knew him, I think, warts and all. I asked Hugh Ross Williamson whether he thought Charles was in any way a saintly person. His reply was so emphatic that I felt, for a second, that I must have asked a damn silly question. His intonation, as far as I can remember it was: 'A saintly person? Oh yes! Well, of course - yes!'

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