

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 55, AUTUMN 1989

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

24 February 1990: This meeting will be a study session to follow up themes suggested by Elisabeth Brewer's talk given on 25 February 1989 and reproduced in Newsletter No. 53. We will form two or three groups and consider the following three statements:

i. Mrs Brewer says: "In 'Taliessin in the Rose Garden' the figure of Guinevere does give rise to the formulation of a series of insights into the nature of women. They enable men better to know and understand themselves: 'the Adam known in the Eve'";

ii. "Blanchefleur's life of devotion and supreme sacrifice presents an ideal and an inspiration, and yet we feel that ... she is a real person";

iii. "The vision of life which [Elayne] embodies is splendid in its richness and positiveness". How do the respective roles of Guinevere, Blanchefleur, Elayne and the slaves throw light on the overall principle of co-inherence in the City and the consequences of its breakdown?

This format for a Society meeting is a new departure for us so we would welcome the views of members.

19 May 1990: The Society will hold an all day meeting starting at 11 am. The plan for the day is to hold the Annual General Meeting at 11 am. This will be followed by reading of short extracts of CW's work by members. The criterion is to choose one extract of CW's work to recommend him to others. Readers will need to explain their choice. Each reading and explanation should take no more than 10 minutes. This will continue until lunchtime. We will then take a break and resume after lunch with an illustrated talk by Adrian Thomas on "The Image of the Body".

24 November 1990: Speaker to be announced.

These meetings will be held at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1., starting at 2.30 pm (except for the AGM which will start at 11 am).

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 18 March 1990: We will start to read Taliessin Through Logres. We will meet in St Matthew's Church Vestry, 27 St Petersburg Place, London W.2. (nearest stations Queensway and Bayswater) at 1pm. Tea and coffee will be provided but please bring sandwiches.

OXFORD READING GROUP

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

CAMBRIDGE READING GROUP

For information please contact Geraldine and Richard Pinch, 5 Oxford Road, Cambridge CB4 3PH, telephone 311465.

LAKE MICHIGAN AREA READING GROUP

For details please contact Charles Huttar, 188 W.11th St., Holland, Michigan 49423, USA, tel (616) 396 2260.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Please note that subscriptions are due to be renewed from 1 March 1990. A form for this purpose is enclosed.

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A NOTE ON THE DEATH OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

Charles Williams Society Committee member Dr Adrian Thomas writes: "Several members of the Society have requested information about the cause of the death of Charles Williams and in response I have made inquiries. Charles Williams died on the morning of Tuesday, May 15th 1945 in the Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford on the day following an abdominal operation. I have contacted Mrs Audrey Tutt, the Medical Records Manager at the John Radcliffe Hospital, who informed me that the diagnosis recorded was

'Intestinal obstruction due to adhesions'. The medical records are stored on microfilm and although they are readily available, access is not granted to relatives or other interested parties for 100 years unless they are required for medical research.

Alice Mary Hadfield in An introduction to Charles Williams (1959) describes the events as follows: 'In March 1945 he went to St Albans to see his mother and sister. Edith silently observed how tired and ill he looked. He was not specifically ill, but he had worn his thread almost through. The European war drew to its end He met Gervase Mathew and in the course of conversation asked him to say a Mass "for anyone I have ever loved in any way". Although nothing was said, Father Mathew felt very strongly that C.W. had a sense that he was going to die. The Mass was said. The ninth of May brought the end of the war ... That night he went out with Anne Spalding and walked about the streets to see the bonfires lit for victory. Next day he was seized with pain. He cancelled his arrangements and stayed in his room. A day or two went by with no improvement, but nothing to cause alarm except that he grew very weak. By Friday the danger was suddenly clear. His wife came from London, he was taken to the Radcliffe Hospital, and operated on for a recurrence of the internal trouble of eleven years before. He never fully recovered consciousness and died on the following day, Tuesday, May 15th. He lies in St. Cross Churchyard, Holywell, Oxford.'

Although with certain cultural figures an understanding of their medical problems sheds a light on their life and work, I do not think that any further such knowledge would help in the case of Charles Williams. An appropriate comment after the death was made by C.S. Lewis in his preface to Essays presented to Charles Williams (1947): 'No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that changed.'

Major Warren Lewis, the brother of C.S. Lewis, wrote in

his diary for the 15th of May 1945 (Brothers and Friends 1982): 'At 12.50 this morning I had just stopped work on the details of the Boisleve family, when the telephone rang, and a woman's voice asked if I would take a message for J - 'Mr Charles Williams died in the Acland this morning' ... I felt dazed and restless, and went out to get a drink: choosing unfortunately the King's Arms, where more than once Charles and I drank a pint after leaving Tollers at the Mitre, with much glee at "clearing one's throat of varnish with good honest beer": as Charles used to say. There will be no more pints with Charles: no more "Bird and Baby": the blackout has fallen, and the Inklings can never be the same again ... I hear his voice as I write, and can see his thin form in his blue suit, opening his cigarette box with trembling hands. These rooms will always hold his ghost for me ... And so vanishes one of the best and nicest men it has ever been my good fortune to meet. May God receive him into His everlasting happiness.'

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ST CROSS by Mary Wilson

Having happened to see the poem "St Cross" in Mary Wilson's New Poems (Hutchinson 1979), Martin Moynihan thinks other readers of the Newsletter may be interested to read it. Stanza 4 is of particular interest. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the publishers.)

St Cross by Mary Wilson

In old St Cross, the blackbirds sing
All day among the cedar trees;
Wild briony and bindweed cling
Around the headstones, and a breeze
Is blowing through the waving grass,
And round the feet of ghosts, who pass.

To wander up the curving Street,
Or drift unseen through College Halls,
Hoping some long-lost friend to meet
Among the portraits on the walls -

Until the booming of Great Tom
Summons both ghosts and students home.

Here, Town and Gown lie side by side;
And Maurice Bowra's simple stone
(And laurel wreath from Christmas-tide)
Are just six steps along the path
From where, in polished marble, lie
The station-master's family.

Charles Williams, poet, all alone
Beneath a drooping pure white rose,
'Under the Mercy', says his stone.
The keeper of this quiet plot
Has here, himself laid down to rest
Among the friends whom he loved best.

With downcast eyes, and folded hands
Near Walter Pater's plain stone cross
A terracotta angel stands.
For Kenneth Grahame, near the gate,
No willows weep, but blossom flies
Along the wind to where he lies.

Here are three brothers; crowned with fame
Were two of them - for Academe
Had paid its tribute to their name;
The middle brother, much beloved,
With falling leaves was swept away
In Isis, one October day.

A cry, a splash, an upturned boat -
An empty stream for those who ran
To see the rising bubbles float;
He was a Scholar, just eighteen.
The brothers mourned him through the years
And still remembered him with tears.

And as they sat secure in Hall,
Among the happy voices there
Did one young voice cry over all
'But what of me? What of my life?

Where are the honours for my brow?'
Three brother rest together, now.

Soldiers and sailors, mountaineers,
Students from far across the world,
Doctors and nurses, engineers
Lie here with dons and scientists
And clergymen, both High and Low;
And over all, the grasses grow.

Sometimes I hear the organ play -
So sweet a sound, to pierce the heart
With echoes of another day;
Remember the Toccata, John,
Pealing in triumph through the night,
The chapel lit by candlelight?

And later, when the crowd had gone,
you played an evening hymn for me,
And in the quiet, still played on.
The shadows shook among the pews,
The candles guttered, one by one.
'Goodnight, dear friend, the concert's done.'

And now your grave is green with moss;
Yew-berries stain the Yorkshire stone
Which marks your place in old St Cross;
The meadow-grass is trodden down
By those who, all the summer through
Come here, to stand and think of you.

Yet clearly now, as one who sees
The image of a memory,
I see you limping through the trees,
Smiling, and shrugging-on your gown
And saying, just beyond full sight,
'Don't fret for me, for I'm all right!'

In old St Cross, all through the day,
The floating chimes of Merton clock
Signal the hours and years away;
And grief dulls to acceptance here -
How could I break the spell, and weep
Where Oxford's dreaming children sleep?

C.W.'s "LETTERS TO PETER"

A browse through the 1936 editions of G.K.'s Weekly has revealed a series of six "Letters to Peter" written by Charles Williams. These are likely to be of interest to members and will be reproduced in this and subsequent Newsletters.

G.K.'s Weekly 5 March 1936

Roughly Speaking

Letters to Peter - 1 by Charles Williams

My dear Peter,

I can't imagine that you would. It is a very curious fact in our present educational system that such things as Macbeth or Samson Agonistes which (on the showing of the educationalists) are the maturest work of the greatest poets, are at the same time supposed to be suitable to the understanding of everyone at the age, say, of 17. At least they are set for examinations. But then poetry, as Miss Sitwell justly remarks in Victoria of England [Faber and Faber, 15s] holds among us 'a position midway between that of the Voice of Conscience and that of a pet dog'. She says it of the arts in general, but it is true of poetry in particular, for owing to its habit of using words poetry can be more easily taken for the Voice than the other arts, and perhaps for 'dog' might be substituted 'child'. There is a good deal of pleased surprise in our general attitude towards poetry, as if she and the other eight of the Divine Muses were small children in their first toddles. 'Look, what the blessed little things can do! Would you believe it?' The answer, of course, is No, but there is some difference between pleased surprise and that passionate awe in which we 'are not afraid with any amazement', as the English Rite recommends to the neophytes of marriage; a remark which always seems to me what may be called one of the superb definitions of Romantic Theology, and of all allied doctrines.

I wasn't going to write to you about Romantic Theology now, however; it is a pet concern of my own, and I will

keep it for another time, merely remarking that it is not O Peter, most peculiarly it is not - that dreadful thing which you can sometimes smell, the Hearty Adventure of religion. Only the other day I came across a sentence by a distinguished ecclesiastic which said: 'You wouldn't ask Christ for a soft job, would you?' I cannot think why not, always subject to His own far-reaching condition. The entirely false assumption is that everybody must prefer a hard job to a soft job, whereas some like jobs hard and some like them soft - compare eggs, and that is, I will not say all, but most of what there is to it. Clear your mind of cant.

Well, but Miss Sitwell. It was the propinquity of a lecture on King Lear and a reading in Victoria of England that caused me to begin by remarking that it was very likely you wouldn't care for Lear - yet. But the two royalties sat for an hour or two with an unfamiliar conjunction in my mind, because the two works have a certain relationship - other than their English geographical. Shakespeare, it must be admitted, did it better, but Miss Sitwell does it very well; it is one of the reasons why her book is better than Strachey's. I can never quite forgive Strachey for being so wholly romantic, nor for being so grossly unfair to Francis Bacon, Viscount St Alban. But then Strachey, so far as I remember, altogether lacked a sense of the mass. I have remarked somewhere (you will excuse, my dear Peter, this and any other reference to myself; it is colloquialism and not conceit. It would be far more egotistic, in this kind of letter, to omit carefully and on second thoughts all allusion to myself. And though, human nature being what it so shatteringly is, there are probably things for which I would risk damnation, your opinion is not one of them. I would no more refuse salvation because of your opinion than I would refuse a peerage) ... I have remarked, and so no doubt have others, but I forget them, that one of the enlargements by which lesser poetry becomes greater poetry is the introduction of the mass, the mass of people. The poets do it in different ways, but all of them who matter much do it somehow, and so do the prose-writers. It is what gives stuff to them. They do not necessarily do it

by talking directly about the mass, or the people, or the poor; no, but by a kind of allusiveness of recognition. I suspect it to be a gift to the middle-age of a poet - his middle-age as a poet. Shelley has it only occasionally for all his republicanism, and Whitman, for all his talk, hardly more often; even Browning has it less often than one would expect. But Pope has it - limited, but there - and as for Milton and Shakespeare, it's part of their very style. It is in King Lear, for what is it that Lear himself outrages, and after him his daughters (talk about heredity! At least, don't, but remark it). Not nature, but nature ordered by the mass of men. It is the civilised arrangement of relationships, it is pietas, which is devastated by their anger and their greed. Actually Lear carries the attack fearfully - yes, I mean fearfully, far, for it leaves one with the suggestion of the complete failure of pietas to be just, and then throws up that profoundly moving and almost incomprehensible phrase: 'None does offend, none, I say none'. No one (thank God!) is less like a mystic than Shakespeare, but he sometimes seems to find, by a mere concentrated natural energy, what other minds have found by the supernatural. Lear has been saying that everyone offends - everyone is equally guilty with the punished criminal, and then he turns, as it were, completely round, and pierces the whole state of things with that kind of utterly different translucency. It is but a moment, and a good thing too. We cannot bear these terrible illuminations: it is safer to discuss what the historical sources of Lear are. That sounds rude, and isn't meant to be. It is safer - perhaps wiser.

Anyhow, Shakespeare had the mass. And Strachey never. And Miss Sitwell, in her - very admirable - degree has it. Read her thirteenth chapter. And read also Chapter XIX, which has a phrase as near to real blasphemy as any I have ever come across - quoted, I hasten to add, and justly quoted, but I dare not quote it again. It has, too, a great list of 'pastes, washes and powders' which, there and so, are almost as macabre as the horror of dark streets that has preceded them. But if it were not for the earlier chapter and the 'March Past' of hell, a hell

of pain and destitution, the very presence of the Poor Toms of the industrial horror, the latter would seem perhaps too mannered, too private a world. I should feel, as one occasionally does with Miss Sitwell's verse, a sense of intrusion into the burden of an honour unto which I was not born. The Lady of Burleigh and all that. The world, Miss Sitwell's world, is so curiously and exquisitely imagined that it might seem fragile, were it not for the realistic March it so steadily endures. It endures also a quotation from a certain Dr Ure who in a book called Philosophy of Manufactures stated of men and girls who earned from eight to twelve shillings a week that 'It was their high wages which enabled them ... to pamper themselves into nervous ailments by a diet too rich and exciting for their indoor employment.'

Well ... it was of Dr Ure also that Lear said, 'None does offend, none, I say, none.' And Dr Ure too once looked away for the first time, and for the first time allowed Cant to enter his mind, and indulged it and nourished it, till it came habitually, like the incubus of hell that it is, and presently he lost all chastity from his mind and became like one of those creatures in Comus -

thick and gloomy shadows damp
Oft seen in Charnell vaults and Sepulchres
Lingering, and sitting by a new made grave.

Or, in fact, much like us.

There is one other sentence in the book you might especially note, on another subject. Miss Sitwell says, of the Queen's writing: 'There was so much to say, but it never seemed to leave one's heart, now, or in later life, and for that reason the heart was often heavy.' Few sentences so admirably express the Queen (certainly Lear had the advantage there), and other writers beside the Queen. There is so much to say, but it never seems to leave the heart. Only rarely, even in the greater writers, does it fully leave the heart; personal comment, personal inflection, remain generally to the end. But I commend the sentence to you as a maxim of style: only you

will have to find your heart, and your real heart, before you can leave it. 'Where is my heart?' you said to me once, being small. God save you, I hope you may find out.
- Always. C.W.

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G.K.'s Weekly 2 April 1936

Roughly Speaking

Letters to Peter - 2 by Charles Williams

My dear Peter,

I have posted the book to-day. I hope it may be of use. But I warn you that you are now at the Parting of the Ways. So you are every other split second of your life, but some partings are spectacular and you are now at the point of separation of culture from pseudo-culture. It is twenty-five years since Mr Belloc's admirable little book on the French Revolution was published, and since then the Home University Library has increased to hundreds of volumes. Homes have identified themselves with universities all over the land, in spite of the fact that the two things are a contradiction in terms. But I would not too hastily assume that a contradiction in terms cannot be a fact of experience; never allow your mind to bully you. It is no use saying don't let your emotions bully you, because they will anyhow. Culture, or the attempt to civilise the interior being, will spread the news quicker when they do, but it cannot be expected to stop them.

Yet, as I picked the French Revolution from its shelf, I glanced round at the other scattered volumes, and wondered. What are we, what have we been doing all these

later years? What sort of mass and mess of minds are we creating? I mean your's and mine chiefly, for after all we are the people who read these books. We, Peter, depend on them - at least I do and you will - for our general knowledge of Revolutions and Epics and Sciences and Religions and Arts and all the rest that makes up man. The books, many of them, are amazingly good; some are amazingly bad; a few are neither. But it is not the books that worry me; it is us. It is we? Peter, can you expect me to end that agitated sentence with the noise which what our Mr Belloc calls the great military tradition of Gaul makes when it wants to say 'Yes'? You could emphasize it? But how are you to know it should be emphasized? I might mean only a dying fall, a 'we-e-e', teaching in song what it learnt by suffering. But never mind that; it is an astonishing thing that the g.m.t. of G. cannot say 'Yes' or 'No' - not like that. It is the English, the most sceptical of the nations, who possess those mighty sounds.

Scepticism is, of course, a necessary part of culture not to say of religion. It was the Blessed Virgin who said: 'How shall these things be?' And I have sometimes wondered whether the people who preach sermons ought not to preach more often than they do on the Moral Duty of Scepticism as well as on Belief. In fact, they confine the duty of Scepticism to disbelieving their opponents - a painfully limited and uncultured habit. My own poor institution - the Sodality of St Thomas Didymus, Apostle and Sceptic - consists of two Companies, the Company of Christians-about-to-become-Atheists, and the Company of Atheists-about-to-become-Christians. In the aisle between them, while they say the Office I have composed for them, we have wondered whether the Divine Hero might not as much deign to move as in other Societies, Orders, Assemblies and Congregations.

But these are dreams - and we all know, even you, what

horrid things dreams are to-day. No wonder the breakfast table is a gloomy place, as the family gathers, their faces ghastly with the dreadful recollection of what they have realized that night's dreams meant. I was communing with you over culture - not that you can begin to smell culture till you are middle-aged, and arrive at that blessed moment when you find that poetry or what not is much more thrilling than it was earlier, that the surprises it holds are many more that it seemed to hold, and that any word any morning may leap into overwhelming exactitude of life. But, of course, you will pay for this sharpness. You will more and more, I hope, dislike blur.

I will say the H.U.L. have done very well, and keep it up. The book on the Spanish Inquisition is a delight, and so is Strasby's French Literature. Did not Mr Chesterton's book on Victorian Literature contain the reference to Hardy being at times like 'the village atheist brooding over the village idiot'? - A sentence only denigrated by those to whom the village is unterrifying and the village atheist unrespectable, by pseudo-culturalists, in fact. And I think it was Miss Jane Harrison's Ancient Art and Ritual that remarks superbly: 'The upper classes, everywhere and at all times, have worshipped themselves' or words to that effect.

On the other hand, about the Milton and the Shakespeare the less said the better. The Milton is no more intolerable than most books on the most misunderstood of English poets, but Shakespeare - it is the author of that book who remarks of All's Well that Ends Well: 'There are startling moments of insight'; he gives us an example: 'The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.' If that is insight - !

But that is what I mean by the Parting of your ways.

That kind of comment is pseudo-culture: all the bad in which it happens is pseudo-culture. And I do feel that there is a danger that you and I and all of us may fall down and pseudo-culture triumph over us. It is arguable that some of the Early Fathers were right, and that religion and culture cannot be reconciled. But I hope that view is nothing better than emotional Calvinism. You will remark that though intellectual Calvinism is under a cloud to-day, emotional Calvinism is as prevalent as ever. It has been brilliantly pointed out by Mr Montgomery Belgion that Mr E.M.Foster is one of our great heretics there; that all his people are either elect or reprobate, and either understand Beauty or don't. I have always admired Mr Forster, but I agree, and I wonder whether he too is not an unconscious champion of pseudo-culture. For though religion and culture may be divided, like devotion and scepticism, and in this perjured and pernicious world may be at war by necessity of their own proper integrity, yet they are but the two sides of the world in the end. But the ghoul that waits on religion, which is hypocrisy, and the goblin that waits on culture, which is this pseudo-stuff, has run direct into the abyss.

Into that dim, obscure, sequestered place

Where God unmakes but to remake the soul.

The main sword against which things may be unsheathed from that old maxim of scholarship: 'Always verify your references', to which I will add: 'Always doubt your own patterns', and even 'and always be very careful to remark when you are making up a pattern'. Doubt; verify reference or statement where you can; and where you cannot, doubt. Decide, in what remains, how much and how you have determined to believe, and what you have not, doubt. (And remember that the Christian name both of Brother Belief and Sister Doubt is Good-Manners.)

Thus doing, my Peter, you will not suppose that you have understood the Greeks by having read even a translation of a dialogue of Plato, or the Middle Ages, by being acquainted with the best Whig

historians; but you will combine all kinds of honour, and as that moment approaches in which what was the exquisite thrill of things arriving becomes (Postume, Postume) the lucid and lordly sense of things departing, when the fine smell of death makes all the earthly landscape rarer - then you may for a moment at a corner get a glance of a City you cannot reach or an order you cannot know, and say: 'That is learning, that is culture, that is the plan of the streets of Sophia. Even though my bus goes through it.' Always, C.W.

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OFFICERS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

Chairman: Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London W11 3BS (tel: 01 221 0057).

Secretary: Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL (tel: 01 346 6025).

Treasurer: Richard Wallis, address as above.

Membership Secretary: Peter Couchman, 85 Hangleton Way, Hove, East Sussex BN13 8AF (tel: 0273 419251).

Lending Librarian: Rev Dr Brian Horne, 11b Roland Gardens, London SW7 3PE (tel: 01 373 5579).

Newsletter Editor: Mrs Molly Switek, 8 Crossley Street, London N7 8PD (tel: 01 607 7919).

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