

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 57, SPRING 1990



MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

19 May 1990: The Society will hold an all day meeting starting at 11am. The plan for the day is to hold the Annual General Meeting at 11am. This will be followed by the 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. Members should bring a packed lunch with them or there are pubs within easy reach - coffee and tea will be provided. After lunch Adrian Thomas will give an illustrated talk on "The Image of the Body". The agenda for the AGM was distributed with the last Newsletter but copies will also be available at the meeting.

24 November 1990: Mrs Vernon Watkins will speak on "Two Notions of Hell" with particular reference to Charles Williams and George MacDonald. Members of the George MacDonald Society will be invited to this meeting.

23 February 1991: At this meeting of the Society Lois Lang-Sims and Glen Cavaliero have kindly agreed to discuss Lois Lang-Sims Letters to Lalage.

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

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 17 June 1990: We will continue 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 Cambridge 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 were due to be renewed from 1 March 1990. A form for this purpose was enclosed with Newsletter No. 55.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to Mary Wilson, 129 S. Lakeshore Dr., Racine, WI 53403, USA.

C.W.'s "LETTERS TO PETER"

Newsletters No. 55 and 56 contained the first four "Letters to Peter" printed in the 1936 editions of G,K.'s Weekly. Letters 5 and 6 are reproduced in this Newsletter. This concludes the Letters.

G,K.'s Weekly 18 June 1936

Roughly Speaking

Letters to Peter - 5 by Charles Williams

My dear Peter,

"Faults have you, child of Adam's stem", and I should be the last person to say that only heaven knew of them. Heaven has communicated its knowledge with an almost indecent publicity. But I will say that, so far, I had not reckoned grab or hold-fast among them. I had almost allowed a flicker of cheerfulness to break in when I contemplated your young generosity, your willingness to hold things in common. Hope hesitatingly suggested that you might not be keen on accumulation, on things, on, in short, property. And now Mr Belloc ["An Essay on the Restoration of Property" by Hilaire Belloc] has shown me that that is all wrong. He has made me feel that not to want to own a house and three acres - to say nothing of the cow - is so cretinous as to be depraved, or so depraved as to be cretinous. You and I, Peter, are the kind of person among whom normal human instincts are lost. I have tried - how feebly! - not to want to own anything, and here I am helping to re-establish slavery. Who

was it said that the virtues always betray each other? "Nobody; I myself". It is true, all the same. In this life we cannot happily endure the mere complexity of the Good.

We must try, however. It seems you had better desire as a social fact what you must not seek for personal gain. You must possess altruistically. You must own your proper house on behalf of a doctrine, and cultivate (O Peter can I see you doing it?) your proper garden lest your neighbour should lose his job. The recovery of property, Mr Belloc teaches us, is the only way - if it is still possible - which we can economically become free men. I think he is entirely right. But I never assented to a doctrine with less personal enthusiasm. I have been very fortunate; the yoke of wage-slavery has pressed very lightly on me, owing to the tradition of an English University and the illustrious goodwill of my own Caesar. But I have never forgotten the edge of the abyss and how near it might be; my head swims to look into it and see the skulls and bones at the bottom.

Besides one must have the idea, the possibility, of property, in order to be free from it. There are times when the right hand ought to know what the left is doing in order to counteract it. Nehemiah (the Tirshatha - admirable title) made his people work at the building of their City with one hand while carrying arms for the same City in the other. It is perhaps a more difficult thing (though that must have been a little awkward) to build up ownership without while destroying ownership within, to own something and possess nothing, to be free economically and spiritually. Could one indeed poise on such a pinnacle? It is our old problem - can the saint and the citizen be

one? Yes, certainly, or we deny that there is rule in unity itself. (It is no use blaming me Peter; he did say everything as Keats said he did. Who? Oh, go away!)

With a passionate desire to make useful suggestions, and with one eye on your future (the dropping, not the auspicious eye), it occurred to me to wonder whether there are not in existence two sets of men engaged in two trades who might form the subjects of practical consideration. I am less than a baby in these things, but I know by accident that publishers and booksellers exist. I know also that they quarrel as men do, over discounts, charges, sales. The associations on both sides allude to the other as consisting of catamounts, catalepts, and catalects. But they make free agreements and keep them. Both associations - publishers and booksellers - are so far free, speaking generally, from domination by inclusive companies and chain-shops. Both encourage the smaller men, and both desire a kind of guild independence for their members. In so far as, on the publishers side, you have larger bodies behind - societies or institutions - the tendency will be, ever so little, in favour of freedom from eternal control. Two strong guilds of this kind, supported perhaps by the authors, might form a very useful body, both as an example of working property, and e.g. in legal affairs - they might help to remedy the law of libel. I suggest that the idea of charters for them might be discussed; licences, as Mr Belloc suggests, might be necessary for the sale of books by a vendor of other things, and the squeezing out of both publisher and bookseller by some million-armed milliner or fishmonger

prevented. But this is far from you at present, Peter, and I doubt if you will ever effectively be either. Besides, this morning what heart have we, but by duty, for these things? I do not know what name will be most on your tongue in the next ten years, or what mind will be a banner of music to you. But I know very well when I was a little older than you how one summer evening on the pier at Southend I read for the first time "The Napoleon of Notting Hill", and immediately turned back and re-read it; and all the Saturdays when the Daily News was the most important thing in the universe. I have never been convinced that the best of those articles were saved - the most militant were reprinted, but not the most superb. For he was a poet, and a very fine poet; he was I have always thought, one of the greatest of the moderns. "The Ballad of the White Horse" had a metropolitan energy in it; it was of the stuff of greatness. And so was he.

Peter, there are only your generation left about me. The last of my lords is dead.

Always,

C.W.

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G.K.'s Weekly 23 July 1936

Roughly Speaking

Letters to Peter - 6 by Charles Williams

My dear Peter,

One of these days a book will be written on the Progress of Humanism in our present age: and by progress I mean merely the way it is going. You may have observed already a fundamental fact of human existence - that nothing is ever where you think it is. If you know this in time, you will be less likely to despair when you find it out. When you fall in love you will have, I hope, a vision of glory, but you will not find the glory permanently fixed where you saw it, and indeed if you wish to 'find' it at all you may have to go another way. And when you have quite made up your mind to that, then It will deceive you again by being where it originally appeared. So that altogether it has been justly said: "He is a God that hideth himself".

But about humanism, and the places where it hides. I have alluded before to its present refuge in murder stories, Miss Sayers and others; for instance, Mr Dickson Carr, a writer for whom I think you and your admirable mother care less than I do. I hesitate to suggest that that is because you do not know so much as I do, but I fear it is true; that, and a preference for the macabre. Ever since I read Mr Carr's It Walks by Night I thought he was a master of it. I am not quite up to date with him unfortunately, but in all that I have read he manages a kind of real atmosphere of the spirit, so that I keep the three or four of his books which I own on shelves behind a chest where they cannot lightly be seized. Along with Lord Peter, Mr Fortune, The Third Man, and a few others. They are, in their different ways, the humanism of murder. They are, in fact, my dear Peter, Art.

On the other hand there has come my way this week-end a book which, it was justly pointed out to me, goes as far as possible in the other direction. I mean Murder off Miami by Mr Dennis Wheatley and Mr J.G. Hinks [Hutchinson, 3s 6d]. This, as you may already know, if you read the T.L.S., the Criterion the Guardian (especially the correspondence on blasphemy), the Atheists' Gazette, and the Bogner and Buddhist Intelligence, is not so much a book as a dossier of reports, photographs, documents, and even human hair and blood-stained cretonne, with the final solution and confession neatly sealed up at the end. It is a very good piece of publishing work, and everyone who had a hand in producing it is to be congratulated. There is a hint that others of the same kind may follow, and I think it would be very amusing if they did.

But this fact, and the equally undoubted fact that I derived great pleasure from reading the story in this manner, with the cablegrams and all the rest so admirably reproduced, does not alter my firm conviction that it is all wrong. Or if that is too strong a word, let us say sterile, because it is in effect aiming at an effect of realism produced through devices of actuality instead of through the imagination. I will admit that I can conceive a great genius seizing on this method in order to free himself from all necessity of "gilding the eastern hemisphere" and the rest of it. But such austerity is rare, and ought to be rare. And apart from that we must always maintain that a murder-book is still primarily a book; its purpose is to live in the world of the mind and to achieve its effects by the powers of the mind. Humanism and realism (in this sense)

cannot co-exist, for one reason - you can never get realism.

Even in this most carefully arranged dossier - I repeat all my compliments - there are, it seems to me, three flaws at least. I will, even to you, Peter, in case you should read it, only mention two. One is a trifle; I cannot see how the steward, if he were reading on his seat behind the door can have seen who went along the corridor. But I am weak in diagrams and I may have got it wrong. The second is more important. One of the suspected persons is called the Bishop of Bude. Now whether he was guilty or not is another matter. The point is that he was a real bishop. But when I read his examination by the police I immediately and seriously concluded that, whatever he was, he was not an Anglican Bishop. He talked like a stage curate: 'I have a large flock, you know - a large flock'; 'Lady Welter is one of my oldest and, you will not misunderstand me when I say, one of my dearest friends.' My italics [underlining - Ed.] - and so I should think! Naturally I said "Ah, ha!" among the trumpets, or like the same horse in the French translation of Job: "Allez!" But I was wrong; a bishop he was, Apostolic succession and all.

Now it is true that, for instance, Mr Carr himself, in his The Eight of Swords, has a very different but equally unbelievable bishop. But then the business of fiction is not the creation of real character (no; whatever they may tell you, Peter, no!), and therefore we are prepared to exercise 'the willing suspension of disbelief'. But if, by all your paraphernalia of presentation, you forbid to your reader that willing suspension, then you will find yourself compelled to be more credible than life itself.

You invoke the law of possibility, a law utterly neglected by life, and ignored by the holy imagination, but necessary for mechanics. The exclusion of suspended scepticism limits the mind to mechanics.

It is true in greater things. There are no loftier, no more intense moments, than those which cry to us: "I cannot be, and I am". It is the mark of that great glory of romantic love of which I was talking: that, if any, is a willing, a compelled, suspension of disbelief. But part of its joy is that the disbelief is there; the suspension is a positive thing applied to a positive thing. It is compatible with the most assured certainty, the most complete and intimate repose. "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief" is a prayer which has a profound meaning. The wise spirit maintains both at all times. It may happen - may? Peter, you are mortal; it will happen that circumstances will change the glory, will force you to an unwilling suspension of belief. In proportion, I sometimes think, as the earlier disbelief and the earlier suspension have been positive, so belief, in its own suspension, may remain positive. Faith perhaps is the experience of belief in suspension; it is a state rather than a decision, though no doubt decision comes into it, and makes a way for it.

And in those states, Peter, you had better be very careful indeed what you ask of the universe, for, by the glory which is about us! the universe will probably give you what you ask. And I may just hint, "in the most delicate manner in the world", that you probably won't like it. One of the most

terrifying phrases in the New Testament is "Ask, and it shall be given you". And then - what?

And now you see where Mr Wheatley has taken us, so let us thank him like good children for that and for his book.

Always yours,

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: 071 221 0057).

Secretary: Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL (tel: 081 346 6025).

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

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