

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 73, SPRING 1994



MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

11 June 1994: The Society will hold its Annual General Meeting at Pusey House, 61 St Giles, Oxford, starting at 11 am. Following this, there will be an opportunity for members to speak briefly (maximum time 3 minutes) on how they personally discovered the writings of Charles Williams. If possible, please let Gillian Lunn know in advance if you would like to contribute. We hope to break for lunch about 12.30. Either bring sandwiches or enjoy a pub lunch. At 2.30 Anne Ridler will speak on "Charles Williams: The Intelligence of Love". The meeting will finish between 4.30 and 5 pm. Tea and coffee will be provided. Our AGM this year coincides with Holywell Cemetery's Open Day. Some members may wish to visit Charles Williams's grave.

15 October 1994: Aidan Mackey will speak on the poetry of G K Chesterton. This meeting will be held at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W1 starting at 2.30pm.

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday, 29 May 1994: We will start to read The Place of the Lion. We will meet at St Matthews Church Vestry, 27 St Petersburg Place, London W2 (nearest underground stations Queensway and Bayswater) at 1pm.

OXFORD READING GROUP

For information please contact either Anne Scott (Oxford 53897) or Brenda Boughton (Oxford 515589).

CAMBRIDGE READING GROUP

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

DALLAS CATHEDRAL READING GROUP

For details please contact Canon Roma King, 9823 Twin Creek Drive, Dallas, Texas 75228, USA.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS - 1995 50th ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATIONS

Oxford - Memorial Service and Society Meeting

There will be a regular Society meeting in Oxford on Saturday, 13 May 1995 which will incorporate a Memorial Service at St Cross Church, followed by a wreath-laying ceremony at the grave. The day will commence at 11 am with a talk, followed by discussion and a lunch break around 1 pm. The service will be at 3 pm, and there will be a party at 4.30 pm at which it is hoped that we shall hear a rendition of "The Carol of Amen House".

St Alban's - Workshop

An all-day Workshop organised by the St Alban's Christian Studies Centre is to be held on Saturday 3 June 1995. Anne Ridler is to be one of the speakers. We hope to have an opportunity at the conclusion of the Workshop to visit St Alban's School.

Kentish Town - St Silas's Church

Later in the autumn, a Society meeting is planned at St Silas's Church, Kentish Town, to include a memorial service and, if it can be arranged, a performance of "Summer Stars". Further details of this occasion, and a firm date will be given when arrangements are further advanced.

Please make a note of these three occasions so that we can look forward to a good attendance and a fitting celebration of the life and work of Charles Williams.

COUNCIL MEETING 26 FEBRUARY 1994 (brief report)

At the Council meeting on Saturday 26 February 1994 arrangements were discussed, and some plans made, for the Society's events in 1995, the 50th anniversary of Charles Williams's death. Members will be notified of the full programme in due course.

New EU-related copyright legislation means that Charles Williams's works will remain in copyright for a further 20 years (until 2015). Council discussed hopes for some re-publication and contact has been made with the literary agent for Charles Williams's estate.

Council also discussed financial and other matters (eg the libraries and Newsletter) about which reports have been, or will be, made to members.

DONATION TO THE SOCIETY LIBRARY

The Society would like to thank Charles Hadfield for his generous donation of three books to the library: two by Alice Mary and one by himself. We are very glad to have them:

Soren Kierkegaard. A play in three acts. By Alice Mary Hadfield, written 1948 - 1949;

What Happens Next by Alice Mary Hadfield. A novel first published in 1950;

Strange Fidelity. Discoveries in Romantic Love by Charles Hadfield. Written 1940-1944.

MEMBERS' PUBLICATIONS

Members may be interested to know that Dr Giorgio Spina has donated a copy of his study of George

MacDonald entitled George Macdonald: Un Disegno Bibliografico to the Society's library.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to:

Elisabeth Joubert, 5, rue Jacques Cartier, F-85000 La Roche Yon, France, and
Mrs Tanya Jones, 15 Montagu's Harrier, Guisborough, Cleveland TS14 8PB.

* * * * *

At the Society meeting on 26 February 1994 Rev Huw Mordecai spoke on "Charles Williams and the Occult". We are very pleased to be able to reprint his talk here.

"Many people who enjoy Charles Williams would be made uneasy by the subject of this talk. There is an instinctive feeling that, with so many positive ideas and concepts readily to hand within the corpus, there are many more profitable concepts to which critical energy should be devoted. This is undoubtedly true, and yet I feel that the area of the occult, and Williams's relationship to it, is one that deserves examination. His novels contain clear esoteric elements, and such symbolism lies close to the surface in many of his poems. These elements have been enough to repel many would-be readers, who have summarily judged Williams to be the literary equivalent of the Hammer Horror films. F R Leavis did not speak for himself alone when he said:

'Charles Williams is ostensibly inspired by Christian doctrine, but if you approach as a literary critic, unstiffened by the determination to "discriminate Christianly", or if you approach merely with order, sensitiveness and good sense, you can hardly fail to see that Williams's preoccupation with "the horror of evil" is evidence of an arrest at the schoolboy (and

-girl) stage rather than of spiritual maturity, and that his dealings in "myth", mystery, the occult, and the supernatural belong essentially to the ethos of the thriller. To pass off his writings as spiritually edifying is to promote the opposite of spiritual health.' (1)

The immediate context of his remarks was a dismissal of Williams' understanding of Milton, but the comments imply a criticism of Williams' entire corpus. They suggest that we are dealing with an author who, while explicitly claiming to be extolling the virtues of the light, is fascinated by the terrors of the darkness. This is a serious charge, and one that deserves to be addressed directly.

In order to tackle this issue, I propose to try to establish some biographical information, and then to see how Williams used these personal experiences in his creative work. There is no doubt that he was involved, for a time, with a society that could be loosely described as occult. In the 1983 edition of her invaluable biography, Hadfield stated:

'Charles' contact with A E Waite had led to their meeting and thus to an invitation for Charles to join his [Waite's] Order of the Golden Dawn. ... On 6 September 1917 Waite wrote to Charles arranging for his reception into the neophyte (lowest) grade of the Society at the autumnal equinox (17 September). ... His active membership was probably no more than four or five years. ... In the end, what did Waite's Golden Dawn mean to him? Surely his outlook and philosophy were not generated or much affected by it. He was thirty-one when he joined and his mind was already well-based, developed and directed.' (2)

However, this was a side of his life which Williams did not often discuss, and some corrections need to be made. Even though he talked of having belonged to the Order of the Golden Dawn (3), Williams had actually been a member of the Fellowship of the

Rosy Cross, which had been founded and was led by Waite after a split within the Golden Dawn. More significant is the length of time he spent within the Fellowship. The Minutes of the society record that Williams was 'received into the Portal Grade of the Rosy Cross under the Sacramental Name of Qui Sitit Veniat' on 21 September 1917. After that he attended the ritual regularly, and progressed through the Fellowship. According to the Minutes, his final participation was in a ritual to lead him into a higher and more secret order, The Hidden Life of the Rosy Cross, on 29 June 1927 - which means he was an active member for almost ten years, instead of 'four or five' (4). Why Williams left at this point is unclear, and has been the subject of much speculation.

Hadfield's question - 'In the end, what did Waite's Golden Dawn (F:R:C) mean to him?' - is, therefore, crucial, and cannot be answered easily. Part of the problem lies in understanding Waite's thought in general, and his vision for the Fellowship in particular, Waite's own biographer has summarised the situation in this way:

'The Independent and Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn had been instituted for the benefit of those who saw the Order as "capable of a mystical instead of an occult construction", and in similar manner the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross was mystical, but unlike its predecessor in that it was wholly mystical; and although based upon the kabbalah, it was also wholly Christian, as laid down in the constitution: "The mode of interpretation in respect of Kabbalistic Tradition is a Christian Mode".'(5)

However, this begs the question of what meaning should be attached to the term "Christian" in this context? Another clause of the Constitution says:

'The Fellowship is open to all who desire the knowledge of Divine Things and union with GOD in Christ, and its path of symbolism is a true light of understanding on the Path of Union.'

This goal echoes biblical phraseology (6), and the thinking of the Saints such as John of the Cross and Catherine of Siena (7). But earlier it was stated that:

'The tradition and symbolism of the Fellowship are a derivation from the Secret doctrine of Israel, known as Kabbalah and embodied in the SEPHER HA ZOHAR.'

For the fellowship to derive its 'tradition and symbolism' from secret knowledge, however interpreted, sound suspicious. Indeed the very concept of a society sworn to secrecy about its beliefs and practices has a distinctly gnostic feel to it, and is likely to be sub-Christian at best, even if not antithetical to Christianity. One writer, talking about the effects of gnosticism, describes the danger of:

'the church [being] replaced by a club of illuminati possessing secrets hidden from the unsalvable multitude, and even from the uninitiated who claimed the same Redeemer.' (8)

Such a two-tier system is roundly rejected by many of the New Testament writers, Paul in particular (9). The stress laid upon hidden knowledge, and the need for secrecy imposed on the members, means that the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross echoes what little we know of early gnostic groups - its members shared an understanding that set them apart from the rest of the world. Waite himself, as the founder, was clearly a remarkable figure, who had experienced an overwhelming personal revelation, which he wished to pass on to others. But such an experience alone does not make someone a saint, and most churches would want to use 'Christian' in a qualified sense to describe someone in his position.

What, then, do we make of Williams? Was he, too, essentially a gnostic, interpreting aspects of Christianity in anesoteric manner in a way denied to the majority? Not only was he a member of the Fellowship, he knew Waite's works in detail, quoted from them and encouraged others to read them (10). Moreover, the central symbols of several of his

novels were also the subject matter for Waite's scholarship - the Holy Grail (or Graal, as both authors referred to it), a mysterious Stone inscribed with the Divine Name, and the Tarot pack - while elsewhere in the novels and the poems there are echoes of Waite's thought. Indeed Francis King has stated:

'that the Golden Dawn system - or to be correct Waite's heterodox version of that system - is the key without which the deepest and inmost meaningfulness of Williams can never be unlocked'.
(11).

However, such a conclusion needs to be treated with caution. If we look at the way in which Williams handled these symbols, it seems that he takes great care not to attach too much importance to them in and of themselves. For example, War in Heaven revolves around the discovery of the Graal, and the attempts to acquire it made by black magicians who want to use and finally destroy the power it contains. For the magicians the cup itself is important - even their attempts to unmake it testify to their belief in its value. Mornington and the Duke also share this view so that they are in deep distress when the chalice is lost. But their companion, the Archdeacon, although initially agreeing, later comes implicitly to rebuke such an attitude. When an argument breaks out between Mornington and the Duke as to whom the Graal belongs, and old denominational disputes threaten to draw close, the Archdeacon resolves the matter by pointing out its absurdity, and concluding:

'But, on the other hand, I will promise not to hurt anyone's feelings by using it prematurely for schismatic Mysteries. A liqueur glass would do as well.' (12)

For the celebration of the Eucharist a liqueur glass is quite permissible, but the Archdeacon seems to be implying that, in the divine scheme of things, the Graal is no more, and no less, important than any domestic cup. Indeed when he hands it over, he apologises:

'For myself, I would not have delayed so long. I would give up any relic, however wonderful, to

save anyone an hour's neuralgia - man depends too much on these things.' (13)

He is actually giving it up to restore a woman who has been driven mad. But his lack of concern over an item that others perceive to be of great worth because of its sanctity, his readiness to abandon it in order that an immediate need should be met, has parallels with the life and teaching of Jesus. Christ's attitude to the Sabbath, his implied rebuke to the scruples of the priests and Levites (14), is echoed by the acitons of this elderly cleric. To a thorough-going occultist, an object such as the Graal would be a source of power, to be clung to and used - an attitude exemplified repeatedly by the evil or misguided characters in Williams' novels. Why, then, can the author be so relaxed in his attitude to this relic?

One common theological objection to an occult view of the world, is that it presupposes dualism - two equal and opposite cosmic forces in an eternal struggle, in which human decisions for good or evil can sway the balance. The Archdeacon's perspective, which is ultimately vindicated, is a deep trust in the omnipotence and benevolence of God. When the Duke is incensed because of a blasphemy, an insult to God:

"How can you insult God?" the Archdeacon asked. "About as much as you can pull His nose. For Kenneth to have knocked Mr Persimmons down for calling him dishonest would have been natural - a venial sin, at most; for him to have done it in order to avenge God would have been silly..." (15)

Admittedly, his companions do not share this faith - and if they did, there would be little action i the novel - but it grows stronger and deeper in the priest, until even when he is being offered as a sacrifice, even when he feels abandoned by God, he can still say: 'I have come because God willed it' (16). And out of that desolation he knows

salvation. This trust is expressed in his constant quoting of Psalm 136, with its refrain: 'For His mercy endureth for ever', and is the same as Williams' own. When talking of the nineteenth century, he could say:

'The great scientific discoveries of that age (or that then purported to be scientific discoveries) threw both Christendom and non-Christendom very much out of control. The pious feared they might, and the impious thought they undoubtedly had, upset Christendom. This was excusable in the impious, but inexcusable in the pious.' (17)

It is the same voice speaking directly in the historical comment, indirectly through the persona of the Archdeacon - the voice of a tried and settled faith. Against such a faith the details of elaborate and malevolent magic rituals seem empty and puerile.

The same picture is clear in The Greater Trumps. Here the Tarot pack is more prominent even than the Graal was in the earlier novel, with imagery from the cards rising up in many different situations. Again there are links back to Waite, who produced his own version of the pack (which is still widely used) and wrote a book explaining his interpretation of the symbols. Williams' understanding owes a clear debt to Waite, particularly in his interpretation of the Fool, whom both men understand as sublime, rather than ridiculous. (18) But Williams describes enough of these cards to make it clear that he is not thinking of the Waite pack. No-one has yet discovered a Tarot that matches these descriptions, and it may be that Williams had designed and was using his own cards, which were never available

commercially. If so, it underlines the fact that he was immersed in esoteric love, using sources so widespread that they are hard to identify.

Yet, for all the learning and devotion which had gone into this Tarot, the author refuses to overestimate its importance. The novel describes the discovery of the original pack, from which all other cards have been derived. Possession of them brings power; reuniting them with the golden images which are their counterparts reveals 'the measure of the everlasting dance'. But, from the beginning, this revelation is shown to come as much from the insight of romantic love as from the piercing of arcane veils - a theme that recurs throughout Williams' work. When Nancy is first shown the cards by her lover Henry, who is one of the gipsy guardians of this mystery, she asks what he means by 'the everlasting dance'. He replies by pointing to the seventh card - the Lovers. (19)

As the novel develops Henry and his grandfather, Aaron Lee, are identified as the protectors of the images, the repositories of hidden knowledge - they are the adepts, who might be expected to enlighten the other characters. But not only are they jealously possessive of what they do know, it emerges that, despite their learning, they do not understand the arcana they have hoarded. Having studied the letter, they have missed the spirit, so that Christ's words to the Jews apply to them also:

'Ye search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.' (20)

The gipsies have searched the Tarot pack, and yet have not found life. In understanding 'the measure of the everlasting dance' they are soon shown to be

immoral novices. The true adepts are Nancy's aunt, Sybil (who alone can see the Fool moving, the mystery which the gypsies have puzzled over for centuries), and Nancy herself who, under Sybil's guidance, increasingly gives herself to be a channel for Love. This self-giving leads her to be reconciled to Henry when he has tried to kill her father, and to love a mad woman who is tearing her hands - acts of sacrifice parallel to the Archdeacon's. And, as in the earlier novel, this giving to the point of despair becomes the pivot out from which restoration and healing proceed.

The Biblical imagery that lies behind these acts scarcely needs drawing out. The picture of suffering willingly endured so that others may benefit can be found in Second Isaiah's Suffering Servant, is deeply rooted in St John's Gospel in particular, and in the rest of the New Testament also. (21) Christ's was the ultimate act of self-giving, but it is an act which every Christian is called upon to repeat and so share in (22) - every Christian, not only those who have received illumination.

Williams is careful to underline the universality of this demand by making an explicit connection between even those themes which at first sight seem most esoteric and the traditional Anglicanism of the period (himself a lifelong member of the Church of England), in a key episode that occurs almost exactly half-way through the novel. Nancy is deeply confused by events, and so she goes to church on Christmas morning because the service will be uneventful, even dull, and so give her a respite:

'A door opened; the congregation stirred; a voice from the vestry said: "Hymn 61. 'Christians, awake,' Hymn 61." everybody awoke, found the

place, and stood up. The choir started at once on the hymn and the procession. Nancy docilely sent her voice along with them.

Christians, awake, salute the happy morn,
Whereon the Saviour of the world was born;
Rise to a-

Her voice ceased; the words stared up at her. The choir and the congregation finished the line -

adore the mystery of love.

"The mystery of love." But what else was in her heart? The Christmas associations of the verse had fallen away; there was the direct detached cry, bidding her to do precisely and only what she was burning to do. "Rise and adore the mystery of love." What on earth were they doing, singing about the mystery of love in church? They couldn't possibly be meaning it. Or were they meaning it and had she misunderstood the whole thing? (23)

To me this passage captures some of the best points of Williams' prose. The gently ironic humour - 'Everybody awoke' - establishes a mundane backcloth against which Nancy's discovery can shine. For it is important that this understanding, this challenge, does not come from any hidden wisdom or secret tradition, but from something so well known that it has become almost stale - 'a very commonplace hymn, a very poor copy of verses', as the passage continues. The confusion Nancy feels is reflected by antitheses - 'They couldn't possibly be meaning it / were they meaning it', 'defence / attack' - the urgency by restrained alliteration - 'bidding her to do ... what she was burning to do.' The prose is simple and direct, and therefore successful. The point is made. Williams was not promoting an esoteric sect, rather

he was linking the wonders he describes with the conventional - humdrum, even - details that make up so large a part of the life of a Christian of any tradition. When he established the Companions of the Co-inherence in 1939, he did not turn back to the detailed covertness of the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross. Instead of pledges of secrecy, there is an openness about all the arrangements. The sentences Williams drew up to guide the Companions begin:

The Order has no constitution except in its members,

that is, there were to be no conditions of membership, unless a concern for others be reckoned such. The mysteries he commends do not come from the Kabbalah, or any Secret Doctrine. Rather, they are the study:

of the Co-inherence of the Holy and Blessed Trinity, of the Union of the Two Natures in One Person, of the relation of the God-bearer and Flesh-taker, of the exchange of the offerings of the Eucharist, and of the whole Catholic Church.

He was not bringing a new revelation, but showing the glory there is in what we already know but have overlooked. All the fantastic imagery of The Greater Trumps surrounds this single point - 'the mystery of love'.

This openness is what, more than anything else, distinguishes Charles Williams from Waite, and other similar figures. Waite's biographer concluded that, although in his novels Williams used:

'concepts that [he] could, and probably did, find in A E Waite's Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, the elegant structure of his work and the

peculiar orthodoxy of his theology are Williams' own. '(24)

And it is that 'peculiar orthodoxy' which, despite Leavis, continues to promote 'spiritual health'."

Footnotes

1. F R Leavis The Common Pursuit, Pelican Books 1978, p. 253, reprinted from Scrutiny, vol. 16, no 4 (Winter 1949) pps 339-44, "The Logic of Christian Discrimination".
2. A M Hadfield Charles Williams: an Exploration of his Life and Work, OUP, 1983, pps 29-30. In her previous biography An Introduction to Charles Williams, OUP, 1959, Waite was not mentioned.
3. A. Ridler, introduction to The Image of the City, OUP, 1958, p xxiv.
4. I am grateful to R A Gilbert for showing me the Minutes of the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, which are in his possession. See also his A E Waite: Magician of Many Parts, Crucible, 1987, pps 148-150.
5. Magician of Many Parts, p 142. For the entire Constitution of The Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, *ibid*, pps 183-5.
6. Among others, St John 17.3, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians 5.19.
7. St John of the Cross, "Et una Noche Escura" Stanza 1; St Catherine of Siena, Dialogo, cap. 1.
8. A F Walis, "Gnosticism" in The New Bible Dictionary, IVP, 1965, p 473.

9. Among others, The Epistle to the Ephesians 3. 8-10, The Epistle to the Colossians 1.26, both of which talk about the "mystery", hidden for ages, having been fully revealed in the apostolic preaching and the life of the Church.

10. Williams quotes from Waite's The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail in Arthurian Torso p. 262 of the One Volume Edition of Taliessin through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars and Arthurian Torso, Eerdmans 1976. Ridler records him encouraging her to read Waite's The Secret Doctrine in Israel, in the introduction to The image of the City, p xxv.

11. Francis King Ritual Magic in England: 1887 to the Present Day, Neville Spearman, 1970, p. 112.

12. War in Heaven. First published Gollancz 1930, reprinted Eerdmans 1982, p. 138. All future references are to the Eerdmans edition.

13. Ibid. p. 184.

14. e.g. the discussion of the Sabbath in St Luke 6. 1-11, and the Parable of the Good Samaritan St Luke 10. 25-37.

15. War in Heaven, p. 135.

16. Ibid. p. 240.

17. The Descent of the Dove, Longmans, 1939, p. 219.

18. A E Waite, The Pictorial Key to the Tarot. Originally published 1911, reprinted by University Books 1959, pps. 152-5.

19. The Greater Trumps. First published Gollancz 1932, reprinted Eerdmans 1978, p. 22. All future references are to the Eerdmans edition.

20. St John 5, 39,40.

21. Isaiah 52. 13-53. 12, St John 10. 18, 16.20-22, 19.32-34, The Epistle to the Ephesians 2. 13-16, The First epistle of Peter 2. 21-24.

22. St John 13. 14.15, The Epistle to the Collossians 1. 24,25, The First Epistle of John 3.16.

23. The Greater Trumps pps. 107-8.

24. R A Gilbert The Golden Dawn: Twilight of the Magicians, Aquarian Press, 1983, p. 87.

© Rev Huw Mordecai 1994

* * * * *

"Inland Travel" from "Poems of Conformity" by Charles Williams, published by Oxford University Press in 1917

Inland Travel

When all our fellowship were young,
We took a task in hand,
And west away from London
We sought the holy land:
The high land, the deep land,
The land that none can see,
The dolorous land of Logres,
The coasts of Christentie.

Intelligence came round us
In tavern, school and kirk,
And west away through England
We sought the holy work:
The high work, the long work,
The work that none can see,
The work that first of adepts wrought
and called it Christentie.

The North Sea and the Channel
Bring mighty ships to wreck,
But the west seas beat for ever
On the rock of Carbonek:

The high rock, the lone rock,
The rock that none can see,
The rock that men called Cephas
In tongues of Christentie.

© Michael Williams

OFFICERS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

Chairman: Mrs Eileen Mable, 28 Wroxham Way, Harpenden, Herts AL5 4PP (tel: 0582-713641)

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

Treasurer: Mrs Brenda Boughton, 44 Plantation Road, Oxford OX2 6JE (tel: 0865-515589)

Membership Secretary: Mrs Lepel Kornicka, 12 Amherst Avenue, Ealing, London W13 8NQ (tel: 081-997-0807)

Lending Librarian: Rev Dr Brian Horne, 11b Roland Gardens, London SW7 3PE (tel: 071-373-5579)

Newsletter Editor: Mrs Molly Switek, 8 Crossley Street, London N7 8PD (tel: 071-607-7919)

* * * * *

COPYRIGHT

Everything in the Newsletter (unless otherwise stated) is the copyright of the Charles Williams Society. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any other means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Editor.

© Charles Williams Society 1994