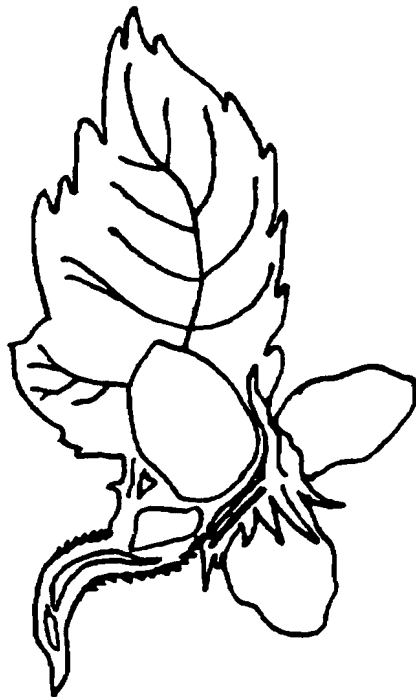


The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 76, WINTER 1994/5



MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

4 March 1995: The Reverend Robert Gage will speak on "Ambiguous Reality: Science, Religion and the Novels of Charles Williams". This meeting will be held in the Church Room of St Matthew's Church, Bayswater.

Buses 12, 70 and 94 go along Bayswater Road, and pass the end of St Petersburg Place; the church is a few yards down the latter. The Church Room is up a passageway at the left of the church, and is clearly indicated by a hanging sign above the door. The nearest Underground stations are Notting Hill Gate, Queensway, and Bayswater, N.B. for London Reading Group members: this is not our usual room.

13 May 1995: There will be a regular Society meeting in Pusey House, Oxford, at 11 am, at which Canon Donald Allchin will speak on "Charles Williams and the Arthurian Legend", to be followed by discussion and a lunch break. At 3.00 pm, there will be a Memorial Service and wreath-laying ceremony at St Cross Church, after which we will return to Pusey House for a party at 5.00 pm.

30 September 1995: The Annual General Meeting will be held at St Silas's, St Silas's Place, Kentish Town (nearest Underground station Chalk Farm), at 11.00 am. After lunch, Gillian Lunn will lead a short walk to Belsize Park, the site of Charles Williams's old home. We shall meet again at 2.30 pm for a talk by the Revd Canon Eric James, followed by discussion. Evensong will be in St Silas's Church at 5.00 pm.

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READING GROUP DETAILS ARE LISTED INSIDE THE BACK COVER.

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THE EDITOR WRITES

Circumstances have combined to defer the postal auction of books from Thelma Shuttleworth's collection promised in the last Newsletter. Apologies to those whose hopes have been prematurely raised.

By way of experiment, members might like to submit lists of 'Books Wanted' and 'Books for Sale' for publication here. Please do not ask for very unlikely items such as the Masques, as space is limited. Nonetheless, it is hoped this may become a useful means of making harder-to-find books by (and on) CW more readily available to members.

COUNCIL MEETING 15 OCTOBER 1994 (brief report)

It is now known definitely that we can hold no more meetings in Liddon House.

The 1995 sub-committee reported about plans and arrangements, which will shortly be announced in detail to members.

Council discussed possible venues for meetings in and after 1996; investigations must be made. It is hoped to have, in 1996, a reading of Charles Williams' last play which was never produced or published.

The Society has 63 UK + 33 overseas fully paid-up members; a number of people who have not paid this year's subscriptions have been warned that they will receive no more Newsletters until their subscriptions are up to date.

Council discussed insurance cover for the Society's Libraries; no suitable policy is available, all are prohibitively expensive.

The possibility of setting up a sub-committee to consider ways of increasing membership was discussed; decision was postponed until 1996.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to:

Miss Doris Howell, 13 Gordon Road, Buxted, near Uckfield, Sussex, TN22 4LG.

Kenneth Yeaton, 7826 S.E. 46th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97206, U.S.A.

THE SOCIETY LIBRARIES

Members are reminded that, although Dr Brian Horne is listed only as the Lending Librarian, he is also custodian of the Society's reference library. Those wishing to use either collection should contact Dr Horne directly.

WILLIAMS AND YEATS

Simon Manley writes: On 10th December 1937, W.B. Yeats wrote to Edith Shackleton-Heald: 'I was particularly glad to get Charles Williams's review of "A Vision". It was generous of him, for he is a poet I left out of the Anthology and was my first correspondent with the Oxford University (Press) and greatly shocked at my leaving out certain poets. I imagine it was this that made the firm choose somebody else to continue the correspondence. He is the only reviewer who has seen what he calls "the greatness and terror of the diagram"'.
'The Anthology' of course is the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, which was published on 19th November 1936. I would be grateful if any member can advise where CW's review appeared and on what date.

CW'S NOVELS IN PRINT

UK members who are having difficulty in finding copies of Williams's novels, may like to know that Gracewing/Fowler Wright Books, who act as agents for some Eerdmans' titles, offer all the novels except 'Shadows of Ecstasy' at £7.99 each, and a set of the six together for £45. They charge £2.50 postage and packing for all orders under £50. The address is: Gracewing/Fowler Wright Books, Gracewing House, 2 Southern Avenue, Leominster, HR6 0QF (Tel: 0568 616835). [Thanks to Gillian Lunn for this information.]

SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS

There are still some copies of the Society's publications, NOTES ON THE TALIESSIN POEMS OF CHARLES WILLIAMS and CHARLES WILLIAMS: SELECTED POEMS, available.

NOTES ON THE TALIESSIN POEMS (1991) contains notes on each of the poems, written by people who had the benefit of CW's own comments. These commentaries first appeared

in the Newsletter between 1977 and 1986. Collected in one volume, they are a very present help to anyone seeking a fuller understanding of CW's Taliessin poems.

CHARLES WILLIAMS: SELECTED POEMS was published in 1986 to mark the centenary of CW's birth. A short introduction by Anne Ridler precedes her selection of seven poems, one from each of CW's published collections. This slim book was hand set and produced at the Perpetua Press by Vivian Ridler, last Printer to the University of Oxford. THERE ARE NOW ONLY SOME TEN COPIES REMAINING.

Copies of both books may now be obtained from the Editor. Prices (including postage and packing) are £6.00 for the NOTES and £3.00 for the SELECTED POEMS. Please make cheques payable to the Society and pay in pounds Sterling if you possibly can. If you are unable to do this, please send a cheque for \$12.00 for the NOTES and \$6.00 for the SELECTED POEMS to cover bank charges.

DERIVATIONS FROM THE CENTRE

Members who do not already know Margaret Kennedy's novel THE FEAST (Cassell, 1950) may find it of interest for its echoes of Williams. Besides its concern with exchange and substitution, the novel contains what seems a direct quotation from WAR IN HEAVEN, together with possible borrowings from some of his other novels.

More recently, Volume 4, Number 3 (Fall 1994) of the American periodical ARTHURIANA (ISSN 1078-6279) contains a long poem 'The Queen's Maundy' which owes something of its method to CW's Arthurian poems.

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The latest issue of the INKLINGS-JAHRBUCH (Band 12, 1994; ISSN 0176-3733/ISBN 3-87067-572-1) is largely devoted to the proceedings of the Dorothy L. Sayers Symposium held at Mainz in May last year. Contributors include Christopher Dean, Gisbert Kranz, and Barbara Reynolds. This, together with the INKLINGS-RUNDBRIEF Nr. 34, have now been added to the Society's library holdings.

Georgette Versinger has kindly presented to the Society library offprints of two articles by her: 'Le symbole de

la main dans l'oeuvre de Charles Williams' from LE SYMBOLE RELIGIEUX ET L'IMAGINATION DANS LA LITTERATURE ANGLAISE (1987), and 'La Quête et le royaume dans les romans de Charles Williams' from L'EXIL ET LE ROYAUME (1993: ISBN 2-86460-212-1). Both volumes (proceedings of conferences given by the University research centre for literature and religion to which she belongs) may be ordered from Didier-Erudition, 6, rue de la Sorbonne, 75005 Paris, France, at 100 FF for the former and 110 FF for the latter. The 1993 book also contains an article by Eliane Tixier on 'L'Exil et le royaume: symboles de la quête de Dieu chez C.S. Lewis', and another Lewisian article, 'L'Apocalypse de Narnia: C.S. Lewis, le Livre et les Enfants dans The Last Battle' by Jacques Sys, may be found in a further volume in the series, PAROLE BIBLIQUE ET INSPIRATION LITTERAIRE (1989, 100 FF).

The latest issue of the Anglo-American literary review SEVEN contains a special section devoted to 'Shadowlands' in print and on screen, with contributions from Walter Hooper, Martin Moynihan, George Sayer and Debra Winger amongst others. Copies of this and of past issues may be ordered from The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL 60187-593, USA.

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POPPER AND PALOMEDES - A POSSIBLE CONGRUENCE.

John Hibbs writes:

Without doubt, the importance of Karl Popper's thought will long outlast his recent death, and this is nowhere better put than in the title of his 'intellectual autobiography', UNENDED QUEST (Routledge 1992). It is a title that could equally well fit CW's life and work, but it is just one of many of Popper's challenges to thought that I want to pursue, in connection with the significance of Palomedes in the Taliessin poems. Toward the end of his book Popper discusses what may be called the ontology of consciousness, and it was to this that I found my mind turning when I was re-reading the Palomedes poems, and 'The Coming of Palomedes' in particular. Perhaps it is 'the passion of substantial thought' (st.2,

1.14) that points up the congruence I began to perceive, which I would like to outline here, hoping that others may wish to comment. Or perhaps it is 'the single equilateral trine' (st.3, 1.22).

Popper is exploring the status of 'problems, theories and critical arguments' (p.183). He distinguishes three 'worlds': World 1, the world of things, of physical objects; World 2, the world of subjective experiences, such as thought processes; and World 3, products of the human mind, such as 'tools, institutions and works of art' (he includes books, too, since even the lost books of antiquity have ontological status in this sense). World 3 is the area in which theories can be tested (never 'proved right', as Popper has taught us), and the denizens of World 3 are what we create.

Now the thought that came to me when immersed in CW's ideas as expressed in the figure of Palomedes was that somehow the ontological status of the questing beast lies in its effect in divorcing World 1 (and, by implication, World 2) from World 3; divorcing, in effect 'the queen's substance and the queen' (st.8, 1.11). Perhaps the beast is a denizen of 'the unmathematic night/of ignorance and indolence' (st.3, 11.10-11). CW's respect for accuracy, expressed here as in his remark somewhere, that 'hell is inaccurate', parallels the objective rigour of Popper's thought.

I will conclude by suggesting a further congruence between CW and Karl Popper, which I have not the time to pursue. It is, I think, deeply significant that Popper should be the great interpreter of the quantum theory, at the heart of which lies one of the 'World 3' concepts that CW found so important; the ambiguity that is at the heart of the created universe. All I can do here is to refer the reader to Popper's two lectures published as *A WORLD OF PROPENSITIES* (Bristol, Thoemmes 1990), which will open up further potential for understanding the work of each of these men better from the study of that of the other. And that is, by definition, a World 3 activity, worthy of the 'feeling intellect' of Palomedes.

(c) John Hibbs.

BOOK REVIEWS

COLLECTED POEMS. By Anne Ridler. Carcanet 1994.
£25.00. Review by Glen Cavaliero.

To read Anne Ridler's poems is to be made aware of continuity. Both their tone and their approach are remarkably consistent. This is an outward-looking poetry which, when it does gaze inward, pierces through the postures and contradictions of the conscious self to the realm of mystery which lies behind. The poems also celebrate the tangible, visible world, but without losing sight of its metaphysical origins. They have nothing to do with self-indulgence in their achievement of self-expression.

Continuity is also the poems' subject-matter. Ridler is very much a poet of married love and of motherhood, for whom domesticity does not exclude an awareness of the world beyond the home. Sometimes that world is seen as threatening and all human stability as being at risk; but although writing with great tenderness and specificity about husband, children, friends, she does so with a sense that love is something continuous with the process of creation itself. If not strictly a visionary poet, she is very much an incarnational one.

Technically her work establishes a continuity between the poetry of earlier times, through both a judicious use of established poetic diction and through a confidence in the capacity of a poem to proclaim truths already established in another sphere; and this continuity is carried forward to the present time by the frequent use of an informal conversational tone, combined with an occasional resort to everyday or prosaic turns of speech, such as were favoured by other poets of the 1930s when Anne Ridler was beginning her career, and also of the 1950s, during which she was continuing to maintain her metaphysical convictions in an increasingly materialistic epoch.

This last aspect of her writing seems to me to be the least successful, matched as it is with a contrasting resort to stock poetic turns of phrase - a good instance

of this linguistic unease being found in 'Blood Transfusion Centre', a title which seems significant beyond the poem's immediate occasion. That Ridler herself was prepared to be self-critical can be seen in the wry 'For a New Voice', which expresses an awareness of the pitfalls that await any practitioner of verse who becomes a victim of stylistic mannerisms.

But in general the sense of verbal tact is sure, a tact, however, that does not exclude the expression of emotion. Ridler's command of a metric that allows her to be both conversational and quietly incantatory (witness the opening lines of 'Mountain Shrine at Lerici') and her keen ear for the musicality of words, enable her persuasively and un sentimentally to convey tenderness, happy remembrance, and a celebration of places made sacred as vehicles for human joy. Her anger, when it surfaces, does so on behalf of a happiness which sin and stupidity outrage.

Indeed Anne Ridler shows herself to be a genuine successor to Charles Williams in her insistence on the fundamental nature of joy. Williams appears by name as the subject of a late sonnet, but he is also plainly detectable crossing the street in 'Red Sea in the City' (one of the more fussily contrived early pieces) and in 'A Birthday', in which his voice seems to overwhelm the author's own, perhaps because her tribute to him is as much analytic as enthusiastic. 'Taliessin Reborn', however, is an impressive piece, a descriptive celebration of the emergence of the Arthurian myth from Williams's mind into the hearts of his friends - an instance of what he himself once asked for, a criticism of poetry by poetry. His influence may also be detected in 'The Jesse Tree', a masque performed in Dorchester Abbey in 1974.

But that influence is most fruitfully seen not in resemblance but in the seriousness of their joint concerns. A poem like 'Deus Absconditus' refutes any tendency towards simplistic optimism, protesting rather that

... it is a long pursuit

Carrying the junk and treasure of an ancient creed,

To a love who keeps faith by seeming mute
And deaf, and dead indeed.

Lines like these authenticate the affirmations in the more celebratory pieces.

Anne Ridler's work illustrates rather well the difficulties of any poet who needs to transmit belief through verbal procedures which aim to discover, rather than to declare, the truth. Whereas the methods of theology are deductive, those of poetry are inductive, working from the particular to the general, rather than the other way round. At times Ridler tends to be assertive rather than persuasive, using doctrine as a short-cut rather than as a guide or pointer. That Williams himself was conscious of such a tendency in himself is evident from the two letters quoted in this Autumn's Newsletter; and Ridler voices similar misgivings in 'The Images that Hurt',

... struggling now to use
These images that bud from the bed of my mind
I grope about for a form,
As much in the dark, this white and dazzling day,
As the bulb at midwinter...

In this account of what it means to write a poem she both displays the seriousness of her dedication to her craft and intuitively provides an image of that sense of continuity which gives her work its peculiar cohesiveness, integrity and beauty. She is a poet who, in her own words, has 'a taste for truth', one of those who

Would work that miracle if we could:
To taste the truth and find it good.

(c) Glen Cavaliero.

SEVEN STEPS TOWARDS SALVATION: CO-INHERENCE AND SUBSTITUTION IN THE SEVEN NOVELS OF CHARLES WILLIAMS. By Dennis L. Weeks. Peter Lang, New York, 1991. Review by Georgette Versinger.

This is certainly the worst book on Charles Williams ever written! I was really shocked at the level of incompetence in what purports to be an academic work (his

Ph.D., St Louis University 1989). One is immediately struck by the mere factual ignorance of the novels (not to speak of some details of Williams's life). I got the odd feeling that the only novel which Weeks really had in hand when writing was THE GREATER TRUMPS: he gives a lengthy summary of it and a number of direct quotations. For the other novels, he is much more sketchy for the plot and his quotations come not from the texts but from critics, and in particular from short surveys of fantasy literature (I have not seen these but, to judge from what Weeks quotes, they are not always accurate; however, simplifications might perhaps be excused in an introductory essay but should not be taken up in a full-length study). At times I really wondered whether he had read the books at all!

To give a few examples: one finds that WAR IN HEAVEN is different from the other novels because it is 'not built completely around the supernatural; nor is it based on fantasy' but is 'like a traditional murder story' (p.29)! When the Archdeacon is bound and submitted to the attack of the three black magicians, they 'summon the souls of Adrian, the murdered Pattison, and Kenneth Mornington.' (p.37) In MANY DIMENSIONS, Arglay, who is said to have fallen in love with Chloe, briefly 'considers how he might move other people for his own sake (...) securing Chloe's love by using the stone to influence her'. (p.41) Later, 'Giles's body is found on the floor of Chloe's room'. (p.45) In ALL HALLOWS' EVE, Lester realises that she can 'make a difference in her movement towards salvation by recalling her former everyday acts of kindness' (p.72) (whereas surely Weeks must be thinking of her unkindnesses towards Betty?) and the problem with Betty's newspapers is that 'there is never (my emphasis) any information or stories about Simon' (p.73), etc.

Turning now to the thesis of the study, it aims at considering the seven novels as being each in turn a point-for-point illustration of the seven affirmations of the Order of the Co-inherence (cf. A.M. Hadfield's EXPLORATION, p.174). These dating from 1939, how Williams could have had this 'progression' in mind when he started on SHADOWS OF ECSTASY in 1925 is not made

clear! In actual fact, Weeks builds more on the supporting quotations from the Bible than on Williams's own formulations. Anyhow, the demonstrations are not convincing, because Weeks too often stretches or misrepresents points to force them to agree with his preconceptions.

Weeks starts with a queer understanding of 'This also is Thou; neither is this Thou', reading 'This' as 'mankind' and 'Thou' as 'God'. So the revised first part of the motto means that 'Man is able to live within Godhead as Godhead exists in mankind' and the second ('neither is mankind Godhead') 'assumes the primacy of the religious dogma that we are cast in God's image and not the reverse'. (p.19)

Weeks never shows any awareness that the motto, for Charles Williams, describes the two Ways to God. And here looms large a basic mistake which undermines much of his analyses, the idea that the negative way leads to damnation: 'when man accepts or rejects an image, he places himself on one or the other of the "ways" that lead either to salvation or to damnation'. (p.18) This gross error explains, for instance, a completely lopsided view of Richardson in THE PLACE OF THE LION.

This lopsided view of a character is a recurrent element. One gets the feeling that the emphasis is never, or never quite, where it should be. Am I biased when I find bizarre the - unqualified - coupling together of Considine and Ingram as villains ('These are the two major characters representing selfishness in the novel', p.27) or the sweeping assertion that 'the Archdeacon is subordinate to the Duke of North Ridings' (p.30), even if Weeks does admit that the former is the real protagonist?

To quote a last (but not least) proof of - shall I say levity? - Weeks writes about the City: 'Williams uses "City" (...) to identify a group of good people. His unusual reference (my emphasis) is, without doubt, based on the fact that Williams loved city life'. (p.106) So much for volumes of philosophical and religious writings!

Weeks complains of the limited number of critics of CW - which surely was no longer the case by 1989. Judging from his bibliography, he has read most of the

important books, no doctoral dissertations and few articles. The sources he does mention, however, are heavily relied upon - very heavily - and a whole chapter is in fact devoted to a summary of, and commentaries on, them. Yet how he could then accumulate so many misinterpretations is beyond the grasp of my imagination!

(c) Georgette Versinger

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At the Society meeting on 15 October 1994 Aidan Mackey spoke on 'G.K. Chesterton among the Great Poets'. We are very pleased to be able to reprint his talk here.

We should, before asking whether Chesterton or any other person belongs to the great hall of poetic fame, first attempt to define poetry itself, and then to consider the problem of what constitutes a great poet.

However, we are limited by time - and by the fact that no-one has yet succeeded in defining poetry. Dr Johnson's 'metrical utterance' is, clearly, quite inadequate - the chanting at a football match is metrical utterance, and Wordsworth's 'Poetry is the impassioned overflow of powerful feelings ... it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity' is nonsense, for the overflow of impassioned feelings need not involve words at all.

Our dictionaries are of little real help to us on this subject. My favourite definition has been attributed to John Stuart Mill, though about that I am doubtful; it sounds too intelligent for the man who wrote 'Principles of Political Economy': 'Prose is when all the lines go right across the page. Poetry is when some of them stop short.'

We must, though, give some thought to the question of what constitutes, in our view, a great poet before we approach the matter of Chesterton's relationship to the great names. There are difficulties to be faced. Would we, for instance, include among the immortals anyone who has written a truly great poem?

I think not. My own view is that quantity, though not, of course, the major consideration, must have some

influence on the matter; that there must be some corpus, some solid body of work given to us before we accept this man or woman as standing among the immortals.

For instance, I regard the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, that pagan counterpart of Hilaire Belloc's 'Heroic Poem in Praise of Wine', as being great:

With me along some strip of herbage strown
That just divides the desert from the sown
Where name of slave and Sultan scarce is known
And pity Sultan Mahmud on his throne.

Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough
A flask of wine, a book of verse - and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness -
And wilderness is paradise enow.(1)

but I would not accept Edward Fitzgerald as being one of our greatest poets.

I love, too, 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand':

We who with songs beguile your pilgrimage
And swear that beauty lives, though lilies die,
We poets of the proud old lineage
Who sing to find your hearts (we know not why)
What shall we tell you?
Tales, marvellous tales
Of ships and stars, and isles where good men rest.

* * *

White on a throne or guarded in a cave
There lives a prophet who can understand
Why men were born; but surely we are brave
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand.(2)

That is great, very great, poetry. But Flecker, dying at the age of only 31, has not left us enough to merit his inclusion in our small band.

What, then, do we demand before we award the laurel wreath? A reasonable quantity of fine verse there must be. Chesterton himself showed an awareness of this when, in a review, he wrote of Alice Meynell that, 'No poet,

with the possible exception of Gray, has established so high a reputation on so slender a foundation, so far as mere quantity is concerned.(3)

Must this corpus be without flaw? Hardly. If we insist that a great poet must not have written any bad - really 'bad - verse, what a winnowing there would have to be! Struck from our roll of honour would go Tennyson, and Swinburne, and Browning, and Shelley and Longfellow, and even Shakespeare. Beyond doubt, Wordsworth would be eliminated. In fact my own view is that our Hall of Fame would, at the end, house only one poet of the English language.

My suggestion is that we stipulate several requirements. Firstly, that the poet is primarily a poet, and that his being finds its home and its expression chiefly in verse; not to the exclusion of all other work, but certainly before them.

We have, for instance, a great deal of glorious and immortal poetry of religion and of earthly love, in which the worship of God or the love of a wife or sweetheart shines through in absolutely genuine emotion. Nevertheless, I believe that, for the great poet, there is almost always a point at which the adoration of God or the praise of my mistress' eyebrow has to take second place to the vital concern of making that damned penultimate line scan! The poet does not ride, but is ridden by, his muse. This also explains why religion and earthly love, far more than any other subjects, have provoked such an enormous body of verse which is quite admirable in intent and in genuine devotion, but utterly lamentable as poetry - because the construction has been secondary to the emotion.

A second requirement would be that we should be able, at least to a large extent, to separate the high utterance and the glory from the unsuccessful, the pedestrian, and the doggerel.

With most of our great poets it is reasonably possible to ignore the failures and to be grateful for those heights upon which we may breathe the air of Heaven. In the case of Wordsworth, indeed, we can almost draw a

chronological line of demarcation. As James Stephens wrote:

Two voices are there: one is of the deep ...
And one is of an old half-witted sheep ...
And, Wordsworth, both are thine.(4)

My final requirement would be that our poet should mainly, though not, of course, invariably, have the intention of addressing himself to a permanent audience, on permanent concepts, and in language which is as near permanent as can be. The events celebrated or mourned are likely to be ephemeral in themselves, but the poet's call should be to those of our thoughts and emotions which are universal and permanent. The fact that the battles, loves and intrigues of ancient Greece are remote from our present concerns in no degree lessens the power of the great plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus to arouse and uplift us.

It seems to me a fatal weakness that so much of our present-day verse is written, not only on issues which are transitory, but in language which follows the irrational, ungrammatical and ugly fads of the moment, and which, therefore, quickly becomes incomprehensible.

On that third count, Chesterton is almost entirely innocent, very rarely falling into obscurity. The one exception which comes readily to mind is his poem 'A Song of Swords', which was based on a passing news item, and would now require a short essay to render it comprehensible.

It is upon the first and second counts that I must confess to reservations about Chesterton as nominee for our roll of poetic honour. He was not a dedicated and single-minded poet. There were too many other things in life of far greater importance to him than poetry - especially his own poetry.

It would be too simplistic of me to suggest that poetry was merely one more vehicle among the many - the essay, the novel, the debate, the letter, the play, the lecture - which he used as conveyances for his ideas in furtherance of the high causes for which he worked and fought. There is too much magic in his poetry for it to

be regarded thus, and time after time we find splendid lines and visions in what has set out to be no more than a squib to enliven a passing moment.

But it does seem to me that a weakness of Chesterton's verse, judging it by purely aesthetic standards, is that for him poetry was there to serve and not to be served. It is not true, as is sometimes said, that he never rewrote or corrected, but it was far from being his custom. The great bulk - the staggering bulk if we include unpublished and uncollected material - was written out once, often for a particular occasion or riposte, and then regarded as being expended and not worth pursuing or polishing.

This reflects also on my demand, that we should be able to separate the permanent from the forgettable. Chesterton was, as that fine critic J.C. Squire wrote, 'a poet of the marketplace'.(5) He had no interest at all in posthumous fame, wanting only to reach ordinary people with all possible immediacy of impact, and his verse, like all his writing, poured forth in a turbulent stream.

The haste with which he wrote, together with his preoccupation with matters other than aesthetic niceties, makes it difficult to find a body of his highest verse which is without flaw, in which to enshrine his name as a great poet.

We could quite easily isolate lovely poems which would satisfy the most fastidious of critics, but when we had done so we would discover that we had discarded very much of what delighted and uplifted us most in his work.

His faults are there on the surface for all to see. You may know that vivid picture, from 'Wine and Water':

The cataract of the cliff of heaven
Fell blinding off the brink
As if it would wash the stars away
and the reduction in the next line to:
As suds go down a sink.(6)

Then, in that delicious tilt at 'Mr Mandragon, the Millionaire', he has the lines:

He used all his motors
For canvassing voters
And twenty telephones.(7)

That lapse in syntax could have been remedied by the simple transposition of the first two lines - but GKC was enjoying the fun too much to bother with so small a detail.

In 'The Ballad of the White Horse', Chesterton had the opposing armies at the Battle of Ethandune lined up in battle order, but made the two left flanks face each other. The error was pointed out more than once but, as his wife Frances wrote to one correspondent, he didn't think it of any importance to anyone, and it remained uncorrected until his 'Collected Poems' were issued many years later.

This brings us to another complicating factor in any assessment of GKC's work: the deep and genuine personal humility of the man.

I stress that word 'genuine' because false humility is so common. Those of us who lurk furtively on the outer fringes of literature are quite willing to make self-deprecatory remarks - but only on the strict understanding that this is merely an expression of our sweet nature. Heaven help anyone who takes us at our word!

Now, Chesterton took the beliefs for which he lived and fought very seriously indeed, but he did actually believe that his own work had no lasting value. His father, who lived until 1922, by which time GKC had long been established as one of the great names in contemporary thought and literature, had carefully preserved records and much original work by his son. After his death, Gilbert cheerfully set about the merry task of burning it all. Fortunately, the bonfire, like that later one of C.S. Lewis's work, was interrupted - but not before a great deal had been consumed.

'The Everlasting Man' - which I hold to be Chesterton's greatest book - is sprinkled throughout with the names of those minor contemporaries with whom GKC argued throughout his working life. Most of them were of little importance or note even in their own day, and it might

seem that Chesterton need not have troubled to respond to them in his books. But he never saw the situation in that light, nor would it occur to him to omit those names from the book on the grounds that within a few years they would be meaningless to all but a handful of readers. He would take it for granted that if those people were to be forgotten, then so would he.

It seems to me that this deep and unselfconscious humility may be the reason, or a part of the reason, why GKC appears at times to reach, in his verse, towards the heights, and then to shy away - as in the one I quoted earlier - as though suddenly feeling that he is unworthy to tread such high ground.

There are, of course, exceptions in plenty, poems in which he did not flinch from high utterance, but these do not, I think, invalidate my contention that his humility militated against his nomination to the highest ranks of our permanent poets.

I use the word 'nomination', and not 'application'. In 'The Outline of Sanity'(8), he describes himself as being 'a very minor poet', and any claim made on his behalf will be made by others or will not be made at all.

Chesterton's flawless poems are to be found chiefly in the short, spontaneous religious poems, such as:

The Christ-child lay on Mary's lap,
His hair was like a light.
(O weary, weary, was the world,
But here is all aright.)

The Christ-child lay on Mary's breast,
His hair was like a star.
(O stern and cunning are the kings,
But here the true hearts are.)

The Christ-child lay on Mary's heart,
His hair was like a fire.
(O weary, weary is the world,
But here the world's desire.)

The Christ-child stood on Mary's knee,
His hair was like a crown,
And all the flowers looked up at Him,
And all the stars looked down.(9)

You will also find flawless poems among those he addressed to his wife, Frances, poems in which he achieved the extraordinary feat of bringing real freshness to the ancient art of the love poem:

My lady clad herself in grey,
That caught and clung about her throat;
Then all the long grey winter day
On me a living splendour smote;
And why grey palmers holy are,
And why grey minsters great in story,
And grey skies ring the morning star,
And grey hairs are a crown of glory.

My lady clad myself in green,
Like meadows where the wind-waves pass;
Then round my spirit spread, I ween,
A splendour of forgotten grass.
Then all that dropped of stem or sod,
Hoarded as emeralds might be,
I bowed to every bush, and trod
Amid the live grass fearfully.

My lady clad herself in blue,
Then on me, like the seer long gone,
The likeness of a sapphire grew,
The throne of Him that sat thereon.
Then knew I why the Fashioner
Splashed reckless blue on sky and sea;
And ere 'twas good enough for her,
He tried it on Eternity.(10)

and flawless poems are to be found among those brief verses written in the white heat of anger or satire.

GKC usually attacked ideas and foolish utterances, very seldom actual people, and even when he did there was more

fun than hostility in his lines. This short verse is almost the only poem in which Chesterton allows bitterness to creep in.

Elegy in a Country Churchyard

The men that worked for England
They have their graves at home:
And bees and birds of England
About the cross may roam.

But they that fought for England,
Following a falling star,
Alas, alas for England,
They have their graves afar.

But they that rule in England,
In stately conclave met,
Alas, alas for England,
They have no graves as yet.(11)

Another fine piece is the angry sonnet he wrote to a public man who applauded the calling-off of a strike at Christmas:

Sonnet with the Compliments of the Season

I know you. You will hail the huge release,
Saying the sheathing of a thousand swords,
In silence and injustice, well accords
With Christmas bells. And you will gild with grease
The papers, the employers, the police,
And vomit up the void your windy words
To your new Christ; who bears no whip of cords
For them that traffic in the doves of peace.

The feast of friends, the candle-fruited tree,
I have not failed to honour, and I say
It would be better for such men as we,
And we be nearer Bethlehem, if we lay
Shot dead on scarlet snows for liberty,
Dead in the daylight upon Christmas Day.(12)

Perhaps surest of all, this flawless quality is there in those glorious good-humoured satires which deflate, with deadly accuracy, all pomposity and hypocrisy, as in 'The World State', which opens,

Oh, how I love humanity,
With love so pure and pringlish,
And how I hate the horrid French,
Who never will be English!

and ends:

The villas and the chapels where
I learned with little labour
The way to love my fellow-man
And hate my next-door neighbour.(13)

and that bubbling response to the editor of a spiritualist journal who wrote that 'The Roman Catholic Church has never forgiven us for converting Sir A.C. Doyle from his agnosticism; when men like Mr Dennis Bradley can no longer be content with the old faith a spirit of jealousy is naturally roused.'

She sat upon her Seven Hills
And rent her scarlet robes about her
Nor yet in her two thousand years
Had ever grieved that men should doubt her,
But what new horror shakes the mind
Making her moan and mutter madly?
Lo! Rome's high heart is broken at last
Her foes have borrowed Dennis Bradley.

If she must lean on lesser props
Of earthly fame or ancient art,
Make shift with Raphael and Racine,
Put up with Dante and Descartes;
Not wholly can she mask her grief,
But touch the wound and murmur sadly,
'These lesser things are theirs to love
Who lose the love of Mr Bradley.'

She saw great Origen depart
And Photius rend the world asunder.
Her cry to all the East rolled back
In Islam its ironic thunder.
She lost Jerusalem and the North,
Accepting these arrangements gladly
Until it came to be a case
Of Conan Doyle and Dennis Bradley.

* * *

But in this hour she sorrows still,
Though all anew the generations
Rise up and call her blessed, claim
Her name upon the new-born nations.
But still she mourns the only thing
She ever really wanted badly:
The sympathy of Conan Doyle,
The patronage of Dennis Bradley.

There are, however, four poems which I find specially important and illuminating. The first of these, you will not be surprised to hear, is 'The Ballad of the White Horse', that great, sustained epic which, despite its many printings, has still not been granted its full due. The ballad form was one in which Chesterton, for all his humility, could feel at home, for, despite all the richness it has given to our literature, it remains a humble and unassuming art-form:

And naught was left King Alfred
But Shameful tears of rage,
In the island in the river
In the end of all his age.

In the island in the river
He was broken to his knee:
And he read, writ with an iron pen,
That God had wearied of Wessex men
And given their country, field and fen,
To the devils of the sea.

In the river island of Athelney,
With the river running past,
In colours of such simple creed
All things sprang at him, sun and weed,
Till the grass grew to be grass indeed
And the tree was a tree at last.

Fearfully plain the flowers grew,
Like the child's book to read,
Or like a friend's face seen in a glass;
He looked; and there Our Lady was,
She stood and stroked the tall live grass
As a man strokes his steed.

Her face was like an open word
When brave men speak and choose,
The very colours of her coat
Were better than good news.

'Mother of God,' the wanderer said,
'I am but a common king.
Nor will I ask what saints may ask,
To see a secret thing.

'The gates of heaven are fearful gates
Worse than the gates of hell;
Not I would break the splendours barred
Or seek to know the thing they guard,
Which is too good to tell.

'But for this earth most pitiful,
This little land I know,
If that which is for ever is,
Or if our hearts shall break with bliss,
Seeing the stranger go?

'When our last bow is broken, Queen,
And our last javelin cast,
Under some sad, green evening sky,
Holding a ruined cross on high,

Under warm westland grass to lie,
Shall we come home at last?'

And a voice came human but high up,
Like a cottage climbed among
The clouds; or serf of hut and croft
That sits by his hovel fire as oft,
But hears on his old bare roof aloft
A belfry burst in song.

'The gates of heaven are lightly locked,
We do not guard our gain,
The heaviest hind may easily
Come silently and suddenly
Upon me in a lane.

'And any little maid that walks
In good thoughts apart,
May break the guard of the Three Kings
And see the dear and dreadful things
I hid within my heart.

'The men of the East may spell the stars,
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed with the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark.

'The wise men know all evil things
Under the twisted trees,
Where the perverse in pleasure pine
And men are weary of green wine
And sick of crimson seas.

'But you and all the kind of Christ
Are ignorant and brave,
And you have wars you hardly win
And souls you hardly save.

'I tell you nought for your comfort,
Yea, nought for your desire,

Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.

'Night shall be thrice night over you,
And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope?'

Even as she spoke she was not,
Nor any word said he,
He only heard, still as he stood
Under the old night's nodding hood,
The sea-folk breaking down the wood
Like a high tide from the sea.

He only heard the heathen men,
Whose eyes are blue and bleak,
Singing about some cruel thing
Done by a great and smiling king
In daylight on a deck.

He only heard the heathen men,
Whose eyes are blue and blind,
Singing what shameful things are done
Between the sunlit sea and the sun
When the land is left behind.(14)

It was the nobility of Chesterton's expression here which evoked C.S. Lewis's generous tribute to the Ballad:

'Does not the central theme - the highly paradoxical message which Alfred receives from the Virgin - embody the feeling, and the only possible feeling, with which in any age, almost-defeated men take up such arms as are left them and win? . . . Hence, in those quaking days just after the fall of France, a young friend of mine (just about to enter the R.A.F.) and I found ourselves quoting to one another stanza after stanza of the Ballad. There was nothing else to say.'(15)

'The Ballad of the White Horse' was also praised by Charles Williams, in a way I find of great interest. It is not, I think, exaggerating to say that Williams

venerated Chesterton. He was writing a series of open letters, 'Letters to Peter' in G.K.'s Weekly, and in the middle of one of them he switches suddenly to the news of Chesterton's death:

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 'The Napoleon of Notting Hill' for the first time, and immediately turned back and re-read it; and all the Saturdays when the Daily News was the most important thing in the universe . . . 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.

You will see, I hope, why I used the word 'veneration'. But that was a different matter. Here, in the middle of his personal lament, Charles Williams was making a literary evaluation, and no personal consideration was allowed to sway that by one iota. Notice that he wrote that the Ballad 'had the stuff of greatness', which is not quite the same as saying that it is a great poem.

That seems to me quite marvellous. With a critic of that unswerving integrity you can relax. There is no need to watch out, as with so many critics and reviewers, for the sleight-of-hand, for the personal axe being ground. You do not need, with Charles Williams, to count your intellectual change before you put it in your mental pocket.

The second of the four poems I have in mind is also to be found in the Collected Poems.

Happy, who like Ulysses or that Lord
Who raped the fleece, returning full and sage,
With usage and the world's wide reason stored,
With his own kin can taste the end of age.

When shall I see, when shall I see, God knows!
My little village smoke; or pass the door,
The old dear door of that unhappy house
Which is to me a kingdom and much more?
Mightier to me the house my fathers made
Than your audacious heads, O Halls of Rome!
More than immortal marbles undecayed,
The thin sad slates that cover up my home;
More than your Tiber is my Loire to me,
Than Palatine my little Lyré there;
And more than all the winds of all the sea
The quiet kindness of the Angevin air.(16)

The third is less well known, though John Sullivan included it in the second volume of his bibliography, 'Chesterton Continued', and it was later reprinted in The Chesterton Review with an interesting note;

Sorrow

At last, at even, to my hearth I hark,
Still faithful to my sorrow. And inside
Even I and all my old magnanimous pride
Are broken down before her in the dark.

Sorrow's bare arm about my neck doth strain,
Sorrow doth lift me to her living mouth
And whispers, fierce and loving like the South,
Saying, 'Dear Pilgrim, have you come again?

'Whether you walked by wastes of upland green,
Whether you walked by wastes of ocean blue,
Have you not felt me step by step with you,
A thing that was both certain and unseen?

'Or haply is it ended? haply you,
Conquering and wholly cured of loving me,
Are but a wavering lover who would be
Off with the old love ere he take the new?'

But, seeing my head did but in silence sink
Before her ruthless irony and strong,

She gave me then that dreadful kiss to drink
That is the bitter spring of art and song.

Then with strange gentleness she said, 'I choose
To be thine only, thine in all ways; yes,
Thy daughter and thy sister and thy muse,
Thy wife and thine immortal ancestress.

Feed not thy hate against my rule and rod,
For I am very clean, my son, and sane,
Because I bring all brave hearts back to God,
In my embraces being born again.'

Thus spoke she low and rocked me like a child,
And as I stared at her, as stunned awhile,
On her stern face there fell more slow and mild
The splendour of a supernatural smile.(17)

The fourth, and last, poem is one many of you may not have seen before. I found a typed and (of course!) undated copy of it among the treasures at Top Meadow before they were taken over by the British Library. It had been printed in The Westminster Gazette(18), then forgotten, and was uncollected until included among the very many newly-discovered poems in the definitive edition which I am now editing for his Collected Works.

When you are old, when candle and evening cloud
Decay beside you spinning in your chair,
Then sing this song and marvel and cry aloud
'Great Ronsard praised me in the days when I was fair.'
There shall no maiden spin with you or sing
But shall say 'Ronsard' and the name shall ring
And sound your name with everlasting praise.

I shall lie buried and a boneless shade:
By the pale myrtles pluck my last repose;
You will be sitting where the embers fade,
Nodding and gazing as the last ash glows.
An old grey woman in grey garments furred,
You shall regret my love and your disdain.

Oh, do not linger, Oh, before all is vain,
Gather, Oh gather, the roses of the world.

Now there is a remarkable link between the last three of these marvellous poems. All are translations from the French. the final one, a translation from Ronsard, was also translated by W.B. Yeats and - as you will know - by Charles Williams.

The first, from du Bellay, and the only one of them to be widely known, received very high acclaim. It was printed in a little book, 'Masterpieces of Lyrical Translation'(19), and the editor, Adam Gowans, limited the selection to a mere 34 poems, saying that each had been chosen simply upon merit as an original poem which deserved immortality. In particular, he named seven 'which bear comparison with any ever made in the past', and in these he included GKC's translation.

Much later, in 1966, it was included in the 'Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation'(20). The tribute paid to it by George Steiner, the compiler, is astonishing and must be quoted:

At its best, the peculiar synthesis of conflict and complicity between a poem and its translation into another poem creates the impression of a 'third language', of a medium of communicative energy which somehow reconciles both languages in a tongue deeper, more comprehensive, than either. In the no-man's-land between du Bellay's verse and Chesterton's English sonnet, so nearly exhaustive of the original, we seem to hear 'encore l'immortelle parole', Mallarmé's expression for the notion of a universal, immediate tongue from which English and French had broken off.

This seems to me to be very revealing, and very pertinent to our enquiry as to Chesterton's place among the permanent poets. My conclusion is that GKC would feel free to soar to any heights of lyricism and sublimity in translating the poems of others, because he would not, consciously or subconsciously, feel that he was assuming a mantle for which he was inadequate. We cannot, at any point in consideration of him, escape his astonishing humility. it actually does seem that the fullness of his

power of sonorous and noble expression he reserved, in some measure, for the verse of other men.

I end with a quatrain which shows that this enormous humility was part of his nature from early years. It is probably from his Slade School period, possibly even earlier, and is addressed to God:

Hide Thou Thy face in clouds and mysteries
Wield as Thou wilt Thy power that makes and mars
But hear. That in Thy roaring wheel of stars
One atom dares to love Thee ere it dies.(21)

To sum up, then: G.K. Chesterton is not to be numbered among the greatest poets of our literary inheritance. He was something of far greater importance.

(c) Aidan Mackey.

NOTES

1. Edward Fitzgerald (1809-83), poet & translator. 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam', published under that title, London, Quaritch 1859. It is a very free translation from the Persian.
2. James Elroy Flecker (1884-1915), poet. 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand' was published in 1913 as a single poem, then in his COLLECTED POEMS, London 1916. Both published by Secker & Co.
3. The Dublin Review Autumn 1923, pp.86-92.
4. James Kenneth Stephen (1859-92) 'Wordsworth: A Sonnet', in LAPSUS CALAMI, privately printed, Cambridge 1891.
5. Sir John Collinge Squire (1884-1958) poet, author, satirist; editor of London Mercury 1919-34. This comment was made in a review of GKC's COLLECTED POEMS in The Observer 3rd July 1927, later collected in SUNDAY MORNINGS, London, Heinemann 1930, pp.45-54.

6. 'Wine and Water', a poem from GKC's novel THE FLYING INN, London, Methuen 1914, pp.43-44, later inc. in COLLECTED POEMS, London, Cecil Palmer, 1927, p.180. It had first been published in The New Witness, 27th Feb. 1913. p.527, under the title 'A Song of the Second Deluge'.

7. 'The Good Rich Man' also from THE FLYING INN. First appeared in The New Witness, 2nd Jan. 1913. p.271, and in COLLECTED POEMS (1927), p.189-90.

8. THE OUTLINE OF SANITY, Methuen 1926. p.71, and Collected Works of Chesterton, San Francisco, Ignatius Press 1987, Vol.5. pp.35-209.

9. 'A Christmas Carol' in THE WILD KNIGHT, which was GKC's second published book, London, Dent 1900, pp.46-7, and in COLLECTED POEMS (1927), p.308.

10. 'A Chord of Colour' in THE WILD KNIGHT, 1900, pp.7-9, and in COLLECTED POEMS (1927), pp.294-95.

11. 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' in THE BALLAD OF ST BARBARA AND OTHER VERSES, London, Cecil Palmer 1922, p.9, and in COLLECTED POEMS (1927), p.55.

12. 'Sonnet with the Compliments of the Season' in POEMS, London, Burns Oates 1915, p.103, and in COLLECTED POEMS (1927), p.147.

13. 'The World State' in COLLECTED POEMS (1927), p.13.

14. THE BALLAD OF THE WHITE HORSE, London, Methuen 1911, and in COLLECTED POEMS (1927), pp.199-288. Note: the stanzas quoted here are not consecutive.

15. C.S. Lewis, in 'Notes on the Way', The Spectator, 9th Nov. 1946. Not collected.

16. 'Translation from du Bellay' in POEMS (1915), p.130, and in COLLECTED POEMS (1927), p.162.

17. The Chesterton Review, St Thomas More College, Saskatoon, Canada. ..Vol.XV No.4 & Vol.XVI No.1 (double issue of Nov.'89/Feb.'90) pp.435-437.

18. 'Sorrow'. Westminster Gazette 24th Oct. 1908. Translated from the French of Charles Guerin. In Sullivan, CHESTERTON CONTINUED: A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SUPPLEMENT, London, University of London Press 1968, pp.88-89.

19. MASTERPIECES OF LYRICAL TRANSLATION, London, Gowans & Gray 1911, pp.27-28.

20. THE PENGUIN BOOK OF MODERN VERSE IN TRANSLATION, introduced and edited by George Steiner. London, Penguin Books Ltd. 1966, p.82.

21. Verse of four lines, untitled. Holograph. Found by me in 1990 in a tin trunk which had been thought to contain only clothing and fabrics, among the archives at Top Meadow Cottage. It is printed here for the first time ever. The original, which I judge to have been written in the 1890s, is now in the British Library.

COMPETITION

CW's books mention many fictitious works, such as Sir Giles Tumulty's HISTORICAL VESTIGES OF SACRED VESSELS IN FOLKLORE or Peter Stanhope's A PASTORAL. You are invited to submit a review of any one of these, not more than 100 words in length, before 20 March 1995. A copy of Williams's A MYTH OF SHAKESPEARE (O.U.P. 1928) will be sent to the winner.

22 entries for the last competition were received from 13 members, the Americans having an unexpected advantage in their pronunciation of 'albino'. The copy of ROCHESTER was won by Angelika Schneider:

The feet of your favourite Rhino
Are apt to leave marks on the lino,
But if you have wax
He'll get rid of his tracks
And that Rhino your lino will shine-o.

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PLEASE NOTE that the area codes given above will change on 16 April, through the addition of a '1' after the initial '0', so that 0582 becomes 01582, 081 becomes 0181, and so forth.

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READING GROUP DETAILS:

LONDON

Sunday, 2 April 1995: We will continue the reading of THE PLACE OF THE LION from Chapter VIII. We will meet at St Matthew's Church Vestry, 27 St Petersburg Place, London W2 (nearest Underground stations Queensway and Bayswater) at 1 pm.

OXFORD

We are currently reading at large in THE IMAGE OF THE CITY. For more information, please contact either Anne Scott (Oxford 53897) or Brenda Boughton (Oxford 515589).

CAMBRIDGE

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

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