

# The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 77, SPRING 1995



## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

4 May 1995: Durham Lecture: Dr Brian Horne will speak on "Charles Williams: Poetry and Theology". For details, see the facing page.

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.

28 May 1995: Commemorative Evensong at St Nicholas' Church, Church Green, Harpenden, Herts. at 6.30 pm. See facing page for details.

3 June 1995: The St Albans Christian Study Centre will hold a Workshop on Charles Williams from 10.30 am to 3.30 pm in the crypt of the Chapter House. Speakers will be Mrs Anne Ridler and Dr Stephen Medcalf. The cost is £5.00. Those wishing to attend should write for an application form to: The Secretary, St Albans Christian Study Centre, The Abbey, St Albans AL1 1BY.

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.

10 February 1996: Ruth Spalding will present a reading of FRONTIERS OF HELL, Charles Williams's unpublished last play, in the Church Room of St Matthew's Church, St Petersburg Place, Bayswater.

READING GROUP DETAILS ARE LISTED INSIDE THE BACK COVER.

### A NEW BOOK ON CHARLES WILLIAMS

We are delighted to tell members that CHARLES WILLIAMS: A CELEBRATION (Gracewing, £9.99) will be launched at the party at Pusey House on Saturday, 13 May. The book, which consists of essays and extracts from past issues of the Society's Newsletter, is edited and introduced by Brian Horne.

### BBC RADIO 4 - CHARLES WILLIAMS BROADCASTS

On Sundays 11 and 18 June, BBC Radio 4's 'Seeds of Faith' programmes will be devoted to Charles Williams. The broadcasts are from 11.45 pm to 12.00 midnight.

It is also very likely, but not certain, that on 14 May BBC Radio 4's 'Sunday' programme will include an item about events in Oxford the previous day. 'Sunday' is broadcast from 7.40 to 8.00 am.

### DURHAM LECTURE - 4 MAY

Dr Brian Horne's lecture on 'Charles Williams: Poetry and Theology' will be given at 5.30 pm on Thursday 4 May in Room 141, Elvet Riverside (The Arts Block), opposite the Three Tuns Hotel, Durham.

### COMMEMORATIVE EVENSONG

There will be a commemorative Evensong to celebrate the life and work of Charles Williams at St Nicholas' Church, Church Green, Harpenden, on Sunday, 28 May at 6.30 pm. Dr Brian Horne will give an introduction and there will be readings from CW's writings. Visitors are welcome.

### NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to:

Richard Jeffery, Lothlorien, Harcourt Hill, Oxford OX2 9AS.

Grevel Lindop, 216 Oswald Road, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester M21 9GW.

### SUBSCRIPTIONS

Please note that subscriptions are due to be renewed from 1 March 1995. A form for this purpose is enclosed.

#### COUNCIL MEETING 4 MARCH 1995 (brief report)

Two welcome announcements were made: (a) a new book to be launched at our party in Oxford on 13 May: - 'Charles Williams: A Celebration': a selection, edited and introduced by Brian Horne, of essays/talks from past C.W. Society Newsletters, and (b) two forthcoming Radio 4 broadcasts about C.W. in the 'Seeds of Faith' series (Sundays, 11.45 pm-12.00 am) on 11 and 18 June 1995.

A tree overhanging C.W.'s grave has been trimmed, at our request; this was partly paid for from Society funds.

The C.S. Lewis Foundation (USA) will be including details of C.W. books and related titles available, in their forthcoming 'Inklings' catalogue.

Final arrangements are being made for 1995 events. Plans were tentatively made for Society meetings in 1996; we hope to continue holding London meetings in the Church Room of St Matthew's, Bayswater.

#### WILLIAMS AND YEATS

Following Simon Manley's enquiry about CW's review of Yeats' A VISION, David Dodds informs me that it appeared in TIME AND TIDE for December 4, 1937, Vol.18, pp.1674-1676. It is hoped to reprint the review, which contains much of interest, in these pages at a later date.

#### BOOKS WANTED

Gillian Lunn needs inexpensive copies of THE IMAGE OF THE CITY, THE DESCENT OF THE DOVE, and THE NEW CHRISTIAN YEAR. If you can help, please contact her directly.

#### SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS - AN AMENDMENT

We regret that the costs of the Society's publications quoted in the last issue of the Newsletter for payment in dollars were incorrect, because allowance was not made for the cost of overseas postage and for the high bank charges for conversion into sterling.

The correct dollar prices are:

NOTES ON THE TALIESSIN POEMS OF CHARLES WILLIAMS - \$23

CHARLES WILLIAMS: SELECTED POEMS - \$17

If both publications are ordered and paid for by one cheque, the cost is \$30.

### POSTAL AUCTION OF BOOKS

Thelma Shuttleworth's generous donation of a number of her books, to help raise money for the Society, means that we are able to offer members the chance to acquire a large number of CW titles.

The books have been valued by an experienced, accredited bookseller. The price quoted for each book is given as a guideline only, so that a lower bid might 'win', but PLEASE NOTE that there is a reserve price for each book of roughly two-thirds the quoted price, below which bids will not be accepted. Otherwise, the books are for sale to the highest bidder.

As on previous occasions, the following rules apply:

1. The books are for sale to members of the Society whose subscriptions and other payments are fully paid up-to-date.
2. Separate bids (in pounds sterling) must be made for each book, in writing, to Andrew Smith, 41 Essex Street, Oxford OX4 3AW. Each book has been given a number. Please state clearly the number and title of each book for which you bid.
3. Send no money with your bids.
4. Bids do not include postage costs. Overseas members please indicate whether, if you 'win', you want the book(s) to be posted by airmail (strongly advised for safe arrival, although more expensive). British members will be sent their book(s) by second-class post unless they indicate otherwise.
5. The closing date for bids is 1 August 1995 - the date by which they must have been received by me (Andrew Smith).

FAILURE TO FOLLOW THE ABOVE RULES WILL RESULT IN THE BID BEING DISQUALIFIED.

Soon after 1 August, I will send each book to its highest bidder with instructions about payment. I will not inform 'losers' unless a stamped addressed envelope is enclosed with their bid.

Overseas members - you are asked to pay for books in sterling. We much regret any inconvenience this may cause you, but we have to ask for this because bank charges here for foreign currency cheques are so high. We have several times 'lost' in bank charges more than the price of the book(s) we had sent.

#### C.W. TITLES

The following information is given about each book: its number in the sale, its title, publisher, date of publication, any relevant comments and the guideline price. All are first editions, unless otherwise stated.

1. All Hallows Eve. Faber, 1945. £30.00
2. All Hallows Eve. The Noonday Press (USA), 1977 paperback reprint. Contains T.S. Eliot intro not in English ed. £4.50
3. Arthurian Torso. OUP, 1948. Poor condition, lacks spine. £12.00
4. Bacon. Barker, 1933. £22.50
5. Collected Plays. OUP, 1963; dust-wrapper (dw). Intro by John Heath-Stubbs. £22.50
6. Descent into Hell. Faber, 1937. Poor condition. Signed by Williams. £30.00
7. The Descent of the Dove. Religious Book Club, 1939; 1st ed. sheets in book-club binding. £15.00
8. The Duchess of Malfi, by John Webster. Sylvan Press, 1945. Includes introductory essay by CW. £13.50
9. The English Poems of Milton. OUP, 1940. 1st ed. of CW's introduction. £6.00
10. The English Poetic Mind. OUP, 1932. Poor condition. Signed by Williams. £37.50
11. The Figure of Beatrice. Faber, 1943. £15.00
12. The Forgiveness of Sins. Bles, 1942. £15.00
13. The Greater Trumps. Gollancz, 1932. Poor condition. £12.00
14. He Came Down from Heaven. Heinemann, 1938. £22.50
15. Henry VII. Barker, 1937. £18.00
16. The House of the Octopus. Edinburgh House, 1945. £14.00
17. James I. Barker, 1934. £18.00

18. Judgement at Chelmsford. OUP, 1939; paperback.  
Signed presentation copy. £52.00
19. The Letters of Evelyn Underhill. Longmans, 1944;  
reprint. Intro by CW. £4.50
20. Many Dimensions. Faber, 1947; reprint. £6.00
21. Modern Verse for Young People. OUP, 1946 reprint.  
Poor copy. Ed. by Michal Williams; includes three poems  
by CW. £6.00
22. A Myth of Shakespeare. OUP, 1929 reprint. £18.00
23. The Place of the Lion. Mundanus, 1931 paperback.  
1st ed. paper issue. Poor condition, spine disintegrat-  
ing. £7.50
24. The Place of the Lion. Faber, 1952 reprint. Dw.  
£6.00
25. Queen Elizabeth. Duckworth, 1936. £18.00
26. Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind. OUP 1933.  
£18.00
27. Rochester. Barker, 1935. £22.50
28. Selected Poems. Charles Williams Society, 1986.  
Chosen by Anne Ridler. £7.50
29. Selected Writings. OUP, 1961 paperback. Chosen by  
Anne Ridler. £6.00
30. Shadows of Ecstasy. Gollancz, 1933. £27.00
31. The Story of the Aeneid. OUP, 1936 paperback.  
£45.00
32. Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury. OUP, 1936. Signed by  
Williams. £37.50
33. Three Plays. OUP, 1931. Signed presentation copy.  
£60.00
34. Victorian Narrative Verse. OUP, 1930 reprint.  
£9.00
35. War in Heaven. Gollancz, 1930. Poor condition.  
£12.00
36. Witchcraft. Faber, 1941. £30.00

NOT BY C.W.

37. C.S. Lewis: A Preface to Paradise Lost. OUP, 1944  
reprint. Dedicated to CW. £4.50

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At the Society meeting on 4 March 1995, the Reverend Robert Gage spoke on 'Ambiguous Reality: Science, Religion, and the Novels of Charles Williams'. We are very pleased to be able to reprint his talk here.

I discovered the novels of Charles Williams back in 1970, when I was a music student in Paris. I had put the idea of a vocation to the priesthood on 'hold', partly because a year of theological study had left me with a sense that the abstractions of academic theology ignored too much. I knew that I had had experiences of what could only be called the glory of God. These came partly through music: but I was clear that they weren't experiences of music. They were experiences of something deeper, something that lay behind the sounds and forms and distilled emotions of music. And these experiences were by no means always associated with music. They came to me in all kinds of ways, at the most unexpected moments. I had no language to describe them. I knew that they could not be induced. And I was quite certain that these experiences were of something other than myself.

Cynical schoolmasters, nurtured on Freud, had tried to suggest that these were the natural effects of teenage hormones. But I was no longer a teenager; and anyway I felt pretty certain that that was wrong. I could not explain why; but I was old enough to know that there are things one can trust even if one cannot understand them.

These experiences I am speaking of felt more real than anything else in my life. I was willing to trust their reality, and the greater Reality which I dimly sensed behind them. I called that Reality 'God'; but I wasn't very clear who or what God was. Having been brought up in conventional Christianity, I was happy enough with the idea that Jesus Christ was uniquely important in understanding and relating to God; but again, the question was how? I wondered if the experiences which had come to seem so important to me were somehow to do with the Holy Spirit; but who or what was that? I knew I had to try and find out.

I had been fortunate in my last year at School to sit at the feet of an excellent philosopher, who taught me a



good deal about epistemology - the department of philosophy that looks at how we know what we know. What kind of activity is 'knowing'? What is the status of something we say we 'know'? I hope it will become clear shortly why this bit of background came to seem so fortuitous.

Having read music as an undergraduate, I went on to seminary, hoping to find ways into these questions. I found much that was interesting. I enjoyed the perspective that historical study of doctrine and Church history began to give me. I frankly found much of what was regarded as Biblical study extraordinarily dry and irrelevant. But when I tried to explore what had really brought me to such a place - the sense of a tremendous Power and Glory undergirding every aspect of everyday reality - I met with caution, even suspicion. It was suggested that such thoughts were rather eccentric, and had better be kept to my prayers.

What I didn't quite understand then was the extent to which even professors of theology live in what we all tend to call the 'real' world. What I wanted to question was the nature of reality, and the extent to which our common conception of the real world was seriously inadequate. I did not appreciate, then, how someone can be a great expert in some particular discipline, such as New Testament studies, and keep their expertise in a watertight compartment, where it doesn't affect any other aspect of their lives. I felt something of Damaris Tighe's exasperation with her father in *THE PLACE OF THE LION*, where, fairly early on in the book, he tells her of a wondrous butterfly that he has seen as they eat their supper. She asks how he can possibly sit there eating mutton if it was really as wonderful as he says. He replies, 'But what else can I do? It was a lovely thing .... This is very good mutton, he added placidly, 'I'm glad I didn't miss this too....'

But in quoting Charles Williams I'm getting ahead of myself. At the end of my first year of theological study, the chance came to go to France and study with Nadia Boulanger. Mlle Boulanger had taught many of the best composers of this century, and quarrelled with most

of the rest; and the opportunity seemed too good to miss. I went. I spent a year immersed in species counterpoint, solfeggio, organ playing, and attempts at composition. And it was there, in Paris, in a student room looking into a gloomy light-well, that I discovered Charles Williams' novels. As far as I remember, I simply came across one of them in the English bookshop in the Rue de Rivoli. It doesn't matter. I immediately recognised an author who addressed the subject that was most important to me - the nature of Reality - in a way that spoke to my own experience.

Before I go any further, though, I want to say that I have never been an uncritical admirer of C.W. In some ways, I don't think the novels are very good - at least as novels. And they contain elements I find - I think I want to say, almost distasteful. In particular, I regret his reliance on magical elements in the working of his plots. I suspect that if I had known him, we would have disagreed fairly strongly (but I hope charitably) about the validity of all supposed magic. I shall have more to say about this a little later.

The immediate attraction of Williams' novels for me lay in the power of his depictions of dimensions of reality beyond and behind the prosaic world we take so much for granted. And the fact that each of the seven novels does this in a slightly different way strengthens the impact for me: this diversity is an implicit recognition of a truth too many 'religious' people miss: that we can only speak of God, or of ultimate reality, in analogy and in metaphor and simile. It would be as foolish to take one of Williams' novels as a direct representation of ultimate truth to read the Bible in a fundamentalist way. 'Words strain/Crack and sometimes break, under the burden.' (1) It cannot be coincidence that Eliot admired Williams' novels.

I cannot claim that Charles Williams' novels were revelatory for me. They didn't show me something new. Rather, they gave me courage. Here was someone who had undoubtedly written out of the experience of something tremendous, beyond and behind the everyday. I wasn't imagining it. Of course, there were plenty of hints in

other authors; but at that point in my life, I needed a particular kind of affirmation to engage with what felt like a most uncongenial zeitgeist. Charles Williams gave me that affirmation. Having devoured his novels, I moved on. I've occasionally gone back to them, and been struck by other qualities - for example, the often sharply accurate depiction of family relationships. But I retain, and find myself often thinking about, the ambiguous sense of reality that characterises all the novels - the recognition that the world is charged with power and grandeur and peril and the possibility of significance and salvation far beyond what is implied by the rather thin way we actually live out our lives.

My discovery of Williams' novels gave focus to a concern I've been pursuing ever since. It can only be expressed as a tension: the tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the tension between science and religion, the tension between facts and feelings, between left and right brain, the tension felt by every individual between their own personal autonomous existence and their role as a member of society. I am coming to understand that what we take for granted as everyday normality is in fact a highly developed, historically conditioned web of presuppositions - presuppositions which influence us all the more strongly because we are usually so unaware of them. I'd like, if I may, to spend a minute or two looking at the character of what we think of as everyday reality.

'I want facts,' says Mr Gradgrind in Dickens' *HARD TIMES*. 'Facts, facts, facts.' Gradgrind is a parody; but he parodies an attitude that dominated the 19th century, and dominates a great deal of popular thinking still. Whether he knows it or not, Gradgrind is a disciple of the French philosopher Auguste Comte, who lived from 1798 to 1857. Comte was a mathematician who turned to philosophy with a sense of moral urgency. He saw the attempted restoration of the Bourbon monarchy as disastrous, blocking the advance to a new age of peace and prosperity. Comte felt that the philosophical basis of monarchy, as of religion, was flawed - or rather,

immature. He proposed a new philosophical approach, which he called positivism. He said,

Each of our leading conceptions, each branch of our knowledge, passes through three different theoretical conditions: the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, the scientific or positive. This fundamental law should henceforth be, in my opinion, the starting point of all philosophical researches about man and society.

He goes on to explain:

In the theological stage, the human mind, seeking the essential nature of things, their first and final causes, supposes all things to be produced by the immediate action of supernatural beings. Here imagination predominates over observation.

In the metaphysical stage, which is only a modification of the first, the mind supposes abstract forces, personified abstractions, inherent in all things and capable of producing them, instead of supernatural beings. What is called the explanation of anything is, in this stage, a reference of it to its proper force, principle, or abstraction.

In the scientific or positive stage the mind has given over the vain search after absolute knowledge; abandoned the quest for knowledge of the origin and destination of the universe, of causes and forces; and applies itself solely to the study of laws, to study of relations of succession and resemblance. Reasoning and observation, duly combined, are the means of this knowledge. What is now called the explanation of anything is the establishment of connection between it and some general laws, the number of which continually diminishes with the progress of science.

The positive system would attain its ultimate perfection if men could represent all particular facts as instances of one general law, e.g. the law of gravitation. (2)

Science has moved a long way since Comte's day; but the philosophical presuppositions of many scientists have moved very little. Do you recall the eagerness with

which Professor Stephen Hawking looks forward to finding a single 'complete theory of everything'?

Science has indeed moved on. At the beginning of this century, any physicist would have taken the view, 'If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist.' Today, physicists know that this isn't true. There are sub-atomic particles which can only be conjectured. They can be located; or their speed can be measured - but not both at once. Then there's light. Light can be regarded as a wave, or as a particle - but not both at the same time. Then there's space itself, anything but a void containing solid particles - 'facts'. Space, we are now told, is curved. I don't begin to have the mathematics to understand what this means; but I can get hold of some idea (however distorted) of the difference this discovery might make to certain calculations.

For non-scientists (and, I would guess, for more scientists than you might imagine) knowledge of these mysteries does not much impinge on us while we're getting the breakfast. The milk has either been delivered, or it hasn't. The nature of milk doesn't cross our minds. We do not think of what minerals the milk contains, or in what proportion; we do not have a picture of atoms whizzing round forming molecules, or of atoms themselves made up of almost unimaginable patterns of energy. Perhaps we could; but we don't. That's not a problem, unless we then move on to the fundamentalist position and say, in effect, 'What I see is what there is: if I don't see it, it doesn't exist.'

My grandmother, to her dying day, did not believe in the existence of germs, and was convinced that electricity flowed through the wires like water through pipes. I feel sure that we all deny some kinds of knowledge in a similar way - but by definition, we don't know what. On the whole, we non-scientists are prepared to accept that there are wonders which only scientists can comprehend. The scientists are sometimes less ready to adopt a like humility - because of largely unconscious presuppositions about what constitutes reality. Sub-atomic particles or black holes may be mysterious in many ways; but there is an assumption - indeed science could not function without

the assumption - that such mysteries are susceptible of understanding. If our equipment were only better; if our maths were only better; if our scientific models were only better - we would understand. Well, perhaps. But perhaps not. Perhaps there is more to reality than physics and mathematics can ever understand.

There is no doubt that in the Western world today, most people believe in the so-called 'God of the gaps': God is there to explain those few aspects of reality that science cannot yet explain. Such a God is, I believe, unworthy of Christians. Unworthy, because such a faith assumes that God is there to 'explain' things. If this is what Comte meant by the theological stage, he was right to call it 'fictitious'. This is not what the idea of God is for.

And how eloquent Charles Williams was when he insisted that God is not an 'idea', but a reality - or (what Williams probably said somewhere) the Reality behind all reality. You will know that Williams does not often use the word 'God' in his novels, but prefers veiled circumlocutions. He is almost as wary as the ancient Hebrews of pronouncing the Divine Name. At one level, he clearly revels in the resonances of such words as Tetragrammaton or Omnipotence. More often, references to God are implicit rather than explicit. And of course Williams makes great use of the hierarchies of angelicals, who by their character and activity further the Divine purposes. I would say that Williams' imagination is here stimulated more by literature than theology. Christian theology has long since abandoned the attempt to integrate a pre-scientific cosmology into its thinking. C.S. Lewis, one of Williams' greatest admirers, reminds us that Williams was no academic, that he had little Latin and no Greek, and an essentially literary acquaintance with a very personal range of theological writings. Yet Williams manages to use these terms, in a literary context, for a theological purpose. He is not attempting to reflect, let alone chart, 'correct' academic theology. He is trying to express something about the ambiguity, and hence the richness, of reality - God's reality, which is

the same as our reality, however much we want to treat it as prosaic and ordinary.

C.S. Lewis wrote a magnificent book called *THE DISCARDED IMAGE* after Williams' death (in 1964). This must be the best quick introduction to the pre-scientific cosmology on which Williams draws. There are a few characters in Williams' novels, usually bibliophiles, lonely scholars, self-taught as Williams himself largely was, who treat some ancient book as a fundamentalist treats his Bible. In *THE DISCARDED IMAGE*, C.S. Lewis shows us how a statement by one author can be taken over by others in a long, descending chain. For example, what Cicero says about the five zones of the earth is repeated by Macrobius. Aspects of what both these writers say go back to Plato and perhaps Herodotus, and forward at least as far as Milton. But for me, the most fascinating thing about what Lewis shows is that one writer's imagination can be sparked off by as little as a single word in some earlier author. The fact that the word existed in an older book gave it authority; and by a wonderful inclusiveness, the speculations of the new writer are given the seal of truth by this often rather slight reference.

Williams was no fool. He lacked an academic education; but that lack made possible his use of ancient texts in much the same way that ancient authors might have used them. And yet he knows what he is doing (in a way that they, perhaps, did not). So, for example, in *THE PLACE OF THE LION*, the bookseller, Richardson, displays an attitude towards the 'De Angelis' of Marcellus Victorinus of Bologna which goes beyond reverence to credulity. It seems to me that Williams has a good deal of sympathy with Richardson: he clearly felt a veneration for old books. But these bookish characters are never the central figures in the novels. Think, for example, of old Aaron Lee in *THE GREATER TRUMPS*. His knowledge of the ancient texts does not equip him for action; and his grandson Henry's attempt at action on the basis of even less knowledge is nearly disastrous. The characters in Williams' novels who overcome evil, control chaos, and become channels of Divine healing are never the ones possessed of arcane wisdom, be it scholarly or occult.

Those characters who do seek salvation through knowledge end up being consumed - Richardson consumed by fire, Simon the Clerk in ALL HALLOWS EVE finally unmade by the Power he had so rashly tried to use for his own ends.

So we come to the place Williams gives to magic in his novels. I know, without knowing the details, that he was himself involved at some time in his life with magic. Williams was a man of his generation. I can understand how someone in Williams' circumstances, living in a world where science, technology, and philosophical positivism were not just triumphant but triumphalist, might explore almost anything that seemed to offer a spiritually richer account of reality. I said before that I find some of the magical aspects of Williams' novels almost distasteful; but I don't find that the magic ultimately invalidates the power of the author's images.

Perhaps I should just say that for me, magic - by which I mean 'the pretended art of influencing the course of events by compelling the agency of spiritual beings, or by bringing into operation some occult controlling principle of nature' (3) - magic, for me, is illegitimate because of its arrogance. I am happy to believe that there are spiritual beings. There may be, for all I know, some kind of occult controlling principles in the natural world. But for a human being to attempt to control other people by bullying spiritual powers is as outrageous as catching a saint and threatening torture if the saint will not pray for the defeat of my enemy. Christians (not to mention the followers of the other great religions) do not demand: they ask. We do not force: we invite. I myself cannot think of a magician as anything but an aspiring assassin.

Well. Regard that as a footnote, if you want. What I was saying was that it seems to me that Williams uses a literary imagination to express something more akin to theology than to literature. The novels, for me, are not really about people; nor are they about ideas. They are about the nature of reality, testimony to a reality which is far more ambiguous than popular science or everyday attitudes suggest, far more pregnant with possibilities, far more shot through with significance and meaning, a



reality far more revelatory of God than we dare to recognise.

I have recently come across quite a new book by Sara Maitland called A BIG ENOUGH GOD. Sara Maitland, like Williams, is a novelist. 'When it comes to theology,' she says, 'I am ... in the literal sense of the word, an amateur - a lover.' She says in her introduction that her book is going to be 'an unashamed and blatant attempt at seduction,' which the reader can choose to regard as 'flirting with the issues'. I tend to regard Charles Williams' novels in much the same way, and to see this as one of their strengths. But I mention Sara Maitland's book for another reason as well. She, like Williams, is playing with images to enlarge our idea of everyday reality to include every facet of our human experience, not just the things we tend to regard as 'facts'. But she does not, as many people do, blame scientists for this limitation of perspective. She blames the followers of religion.

... the scientific materialists seem to have frightened a lot of Christians badly (she says). Scared of what we might find, we seem stubbornly to turn our back on the thrilling truths that scientists are offering us. This has been going on since Galileo, but it has got worse recently - first with evolutionary theory and now with post-Einsteinian physics and most immediately with cosmology. I was a bit surprised in 1992, when they discovered the radio-wave fluctuations that are necessary to the Big Bang scenario, that most of the serious newspapers felt it incumbent on them to get in a theologian to say we could still go on believing in God if we wanted to. I was taken aback, really, that anyone should feel that their faith might be shaken by something so stunningly powerful and beautiful as this new creation narrative: by something as impressive as the creative and imaginative energy that had gone into discovering it; and the international solidarity and sharing of labour that had enabled the discovery. The waves themselves, and the human success in discovering them, seemed powerfully reassuring to my conviction in the fertility and power of God. (4)

The novels of Charles Williams are all about people having experiences which testify to a bigger reality than they can comprehend. His characters tend to react in one of two ways. They either pass through a period of amazement and wonder to a humble acceptance of the experience which does not demand understanding as a condition of response; or else they close their minds and their hearts, and refuse to see what stares them in the face, thus precluding the possibility of response. The first sort of characters win through to some kind of new equilibrium or even beatitude; the others fade or sink or implode - they are shown to have committed a kind of suicide. Again, T.S. Eliot's lines come to mind:

The only hope, or else despair

Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre -

To be redeemed from fire by fire. (5)

Williams' novels seem to me to pose a challenge not unlike the challenge of modern science: Will we allow ourselves to see? Will we dare to admit the doubt and confusion and disorientation that are the inevitable concomitants of new experience - new in the sense that it doesn't fit into the models of reality by which we order our lives. Will we find the courage to hold fast to what we know to be true, yet sit lightly enough to our hold on truth to allow for the readjustment that new experience may require? These novels demand a response from their characters, and also from their readers; and the response they demand from us is the same as what is demanded of us by life. Very often, we manage not to see that life demands anything of us. The power of Williams' novels is ultimately that they insist that we open ourselves to a larger reality than we find comfortable.

It has been said by a prominent physicist that physicists tend to speak of God more than the clergy do. Even if that's not true (and I fear that sometimes it is), I feel that it's a terrible indictment of the institutional Church that a scientist could plausibly make that suggestion. Christians are, of course, always people of their own time, whatever else they become; and too many people of our time have become spectators of life, rather than participants in it. Perhaps it's the influence of

television; perhaps we've become overwhelmed by our sheer numbers. The fact is that many people today feel that whatever they do or don't do, whatever they are, won't make much difference to anybody else in the long run. They can choose to be interested, or they can choose to be bored; but no-one else is likely to notice, and it certainly doesn't feel to them that anyone else is likely to be affected. And for many people today, there is also no question of either salvation or damnation. There is only life - i.e., the passing of time - and then death. It is a cruelly arid world-view; although to say that it is cruel is not to challenge its truth. It is, alas, a view which Christianity does not always seem able to challenge. I believe that the Church can re-learn how to challenge this sad curtailing of human potential by various means - one of which is something else that modern physics and the novels of Charles Williams hold in common.

I refer to an attitude of reverence and awe. To say that the Church is bad at teaching reverence and awe may sound strange; but I believe it is often so. We have become so user-friendly, so matey, that many of those worshipping week by week might be excused for regarding as natural the mode of prayer I heard in a famous public school chapel a couple of years ago. The chaplain, no doubt wanting to avoid saying anything which would make God seem unapproachable, concluded his prayer with the words, 'through Jesus Christ, our Friend.' I do not wish to suggest that Jesus Christ is anything other than the Friend of Sinners; but this chummy style of supplication can only lead to a distorted idea of God, far removed from the experience of the great saints, the great mystics, and the great scientists. The miraculous heart of the Christian religion is the recognition that God is, and remains, unapproachable in uncreated light and unspeakable glory; yet, because he has approached us by means of the Incarnation, we can draw near to him without being destroyed. The patriarchs of the Old Testament knew that no-one could look on God and live. Christians know something not other, but more: brought into the presence of the everlasting Trinity through our incorpor-

ation into Jesus Christ, we can look on God; and while we may die to our former selves, we can live in him.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The experience of awe, it seems to me, is the basis for all religious faith, and, together with curiosity, the basis for all learning. The experience of awe tells us that there is something worth learning about, something worth relating to, which we can even now love and admire. The scene in *THE GREATER TRUMPS* in the church on Christmas Day has stuck in my mind with particular vividness since I first read it. Nancy is being assaulted by a great deal of experience that is seriously disquieting. She goes to church with the others thinking that at least she will have some respite for an hour or so. The first hymn is given out; she rises with the others and begins to sing:

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 do precisely and only what she was burning to do. "Rise to 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?

The church was no longer a defence; it was an attack. From another side the waves of some impetuous and greater life swept in upon her. She turned her head abruptly towards Sybil, who felt the movement and looked back.... Nancy, her finger pointing to the first of those great verses, whispered a question, "is it true?" Sybil looked at the line, looked back at Nancy, and answered in a voice both aspirant and triumphant, "Try it, darling." (6)

Similar scenes can be found in any of Williams' novels. The sudden, unexpected surprise of being met by some

significance or truth or presence; the amazed first response, with the question, 'Has this been in front of me all along and I've missed it?'; the checking out with someone else's experience, and being told, not, 'It is true,' but 'Try it, darling.' For we can't be told: we can't receive experience on the authority of someone else. We can only take the plunge, and try it, and see. It has long been said that faith is like a slender rope over a chasm, which doesn't look as if it would bear our weight. The only way to find out is to try it. Sometimes, unless the danger behind becomes very great, we can't find the courage for such a leap. And that is just what happens in Williams' novels: the danger becomes explicit, unavoidable. It is a case of leap or die. Some leap, and some die. But the danger is not necessarily malign.

Who then devised the torment? Love.

Love is the unfamiliar Name

Behind the hands that wove

The intolerable shirt of flame

Which human power cannot remove. (7)

This sense of awe, and of peril, is, I think, the experience of more than a few scientists today, even though they may not call it by the names I'd want to use. Many scientists, of course, are fiercely opposed to God and the Church. We have all read the strident letters of Richard Dawkins in the newspapers. 'Angela Tilby reports Dr Jonathan Miller saying ... that (many scientists) regard religion as a form of mental illness.' Sara Maitland comments on this: 'God no more forces faith on astrological physicists and mathematicians than on the rest of us. Nevertheless, looking for the scientific facts among the far-flung astral bodies, just as peering at them within the whizzing orbits of the atom, seems to affect people's language, and therefore we may assume their consciousness.... (Stephen) Hawking, who can imagine no "point" in a creator, no place or need for one, demands in painfully beautiful and urgent terms, which seem more reminiscent of the Spanish mystics than of deductive logic, "What is it that breathes fire into

the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?" (8)

Sara Maitland continues, 'Scientists come to the question of ultimate meaning with carefully trained minds, more disciplined in clarity perhaps than anyone else nowadays. They come to these questions also with an open-mindedness of a special sort, as their trade requires it of them. All theory must be submitted to the process of experiment, and all experiment must be repeatable. Even when they report back as non-believers, it seems to me that they bring us the precious gifts of epiphany, magi from a distant land bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh.' (9)

I am going to test your patience with one more quotation from Sara Maitland's admirable book A BIG ENOUGH GOD, because it seems to me to sum up so well the essence of all of Charles Williams' novels:

"Considering how dangerous everything is, nothing is really very frightening," wrote Gertrude Stein (not a woman much quoted in moral exhortatory literature). If we can accept that at the centre, at the most important places, there is no safety, then we do not have to waste time bowing down to false gods, but will be free to go out and live courageously at the edge of our humanity; where we can "see God and live". Courage is itself a source of joy, and we can seek it from the wild, the untamed God, who runs such risks for me. We need courage so that we dare to leave the land of slavery and walk boldly and joyfully through the dangerous waters and the barren deserts. Only there can we learn to sing and laugh; for wherever we let God lead us will be our promised land. (10)

Charles Williams could have written that, though his turn of phrase might have been different. And yet perhaps Williams would not have stopped where Sara Maitland does. Another curse of our time is an excessive individualism, born no doubt in part of the belief that what I do isn't likely to affect anyone else. Williams' novels abound in examples of how my salvation is bound up with yours, and yours with mine. you may still be saved if I am lost; but we are meant to assist each other. Sara Maitland is

not espousing an individualist creed; but she is not as careful as Williams would be to make that clear. Williams said in an essay, 'The unexclusive life of the city ... is everywhere vicarious life, up to the level of each capacity ... The "bear one another's burdens" runs through it all.... The methods of exchange, of carrying burdens and of giving up burdens to be carried; of acting in the strength of others; of making commitments by others; all these may be found to be full of meaning much beyond our ordinary understanding.' (11)

That last phrase sums up the quite simple point I've been trying to make in this paper: life is full of meaning beyond our understanding. it's one thing to recognise that intellectually: most of us can manage this. It's quite another thing to learn to live by this knowledge, to practise a true openness to people and experience which is not uncritical, but which does not allow our inevitable presuppositions to filter out the richness of reality. To live this way, we need to learn a lack of embarrassment about awe; we need to foster the practice of adoration. In England, at least, a great deal of Christianity has become so prosaic that it neither challenges us to enlarge our horizons, nor helps us 'rise to adore the mystery of love'. it should not be surprising that weird manifestations such as the so-called Toronto Blessing are springing up. God will not allow himself to be fossilised, and a volcano or two may be necessary. But no-one can live for very long in a volcano, and I cannot believe that such extreme manifestations of spiritual life (if that is what they are) can set a pattern for general imitation.

I hope it has become clear that I value the novels of Charles Williams not so much for themselves (I think they remain rather odd books, not wholly successful as novels), but for what they bear witness to. My discovery of them at a particular stage of my journey gave me a set of images which helped me to articulate something I was experiencing, but for which I had no language. I hope I have shown how some current attitudes to science also reflect a response to the same kinds of experience that Williams was responding to. I want to conclude by

referring to Angela Tilby's book SOUL, which is subtitled 'New cosmology, the self and God'. This book came out of her BBC television series 'Soul'. I commend it to you as an immensely stimulating introduction to the dialogue between theologians and scientists, which seems to me the most exciting thing happening in Christianity at the moment. As I read Angela Tilby's book, I found that images from Charles Williams' novels kept coming back to me. Perhaps this quotation from the last chapter of SOUL will suggest why....

She has been talking about the Trinity:

We need to hold together points of view that have sometimes annihilated each other in Christian tradition: the idea that God creates from nothing with the idea that creation continues as a dialogue between creation and creature; the idea that creation is autonomous with the idea of its total dependence on God; the idea of God's transcendence with the idea that the creation evolves to participate in the divine life; the idea that God penetrates creation with the idea that creation is inherently alive with promise and possibility.

She continues:

There is no rivalry ... if we allow for the complexity of God.... God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons. We might say that the imagery and language collapses into graspable form depending on how we choose to approach God. The dualities are like the wave/particle duality in quantum physics. God is one and God is three, and the different expressions are complementary rather than oppositional. We experience God in the mode we call upon God. In the West we tend to overplay the monotheism, perhaps in part because of our unconscious fear of diversity in nature and in God. We do not seek or enter a life-giving relationship with the Trinity, because we are addicted to monism, out of touch with and frightened by the seething creativity that besieges us. (12)

Charles Williams wasn't frightened; and I think he was less out of touch than most of us. Like all those, religious or anti-religious, who see something of the



wonder and splendour and ambiguity and richness of the reality in which we live, of which we ourselves are part, Williams doesn't try too hard to tell us about it: he invites us to wake up and experience it for ourselves. I know it's dangerous to attribute words to those who can no longer refute them, but I think Williams could easily have written Angela Tilby's final sentence:

God is the One who is, the Voice who calls the different parts of creation into being from nothing, and also the Dancer who weaves the spacetime web of this world with all its mysterious links and invisible relationships. (13)

The invitation is being shouted at us by all creation, 'Rise to adore the mystery of love.' Adoring, learn to love. Loving, learn to join the Dance, fearful of nothing except holding back. 'Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.' (14) And dancing, learn to be. Learn to be what you were created to be; learn to create what, in cooperation with God, you desire to be. There are no spectators, only those who choose life, or death. Choose life.

(c) Robert Gage.

#### NOTES

1. T.S. Eliot, FOUR QUARTETS, Burnt Norton, V.
2. Quoted in Alburey Castell, AN INTRODUCTION TO MODERN PHILOSOPHY, Macmillan, New York 1963, pp.119-121.
3. Oxford Shorter Dictionary.
4. Sara Maitland, A BIG ENOUGH GOD, Mowbray 1995, pp.13-14.
5. T.S. Eliot, FOUR QUARTETS, Little Gidding, IV.
6. Charles Williams, THE GREATER TRUMPS, Eerdmans 1950, pp.107-8.
7. T.S. Eliot, FOUR QUARTETS, Little Gidding, IV.
8. Maitland, op. cit., p.49.
9. Ibid., p.50.
10. Ibid., p.182.
11. Charles Williams, 'The Redeemed City' in THE IMAGE OF THE CITY, O.U.P. 1970, p.107.
12. Angela Tilby, SOUL, S.P.C.K. 1992, pp.258-9.
13. Ibid., p.259.
14. St Mark 8.35 and parallels.

### COMPETITION

'If I were running a competition column,' says Williams in 'Antichrist and the City's Laws' (TIME & TIDE, August 1938; reprinted in THE IMAGE OF THE CITY, pp.117-121), 'I would offer a prize for the best candidate for Antichrist, with brief reasons.' You are therefore invited to submit your nominations for the role to the Editor by 13 June. A copy of CHARLES WILLIAMS: ESSENTIAL WRITINGS IN SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY, edited by Charles Hefling, will be awarded to the winner.

12 entries for the last competition were received from 6 members. Sir Giles Tumulty's HISTORICAL VESTIGES received the most - and harshest - reviews, including a sharply-worded dismissal from M.R. James (mediated by Dale Nelson). Lord Arglay's SURVEY OF ORGANIC LAW revealed itself, through Arti Ponsen's baffled reviewer, as a very CW-esque work, with its theme of 'Geometry of Law', its allusions to the Kabbalah, and the unexplained appearance of Broceliande in its account of Magna Carta. Roger Ingram's PERSUASIVE SERPENTS was severely handled by Richard Jeffery in a crescendo of indignant rhetorical questions. However, the copy of A MYTH OF SHAKESPEARE was won by George Every with the following:

A PASTORAL, by Peter Stanhope, Faber.

Peter Stanhope has always been fascinated by episodes in the early history of ancient and modern drama, by what is known of archaic Greece, and again of interludes and mystery plays, by the good that terrifies. In this there is a minimum of plot and what there is relates to the emergence of human actors from a chorus that is not exactly human, whether superhuman or subhuman may be in doubt. The reader may shut up the book baffled, but those who have participated with the chorus out of the audience will never be the same again.

\* \* \* \* \*

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## READING GROUP DETAILS:

### LONDON

Sunday, 6 August 1995 (Feast of the Transfiguration): We will continue the reading of THE PLACE OF THE LION from Chapter XI. 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 continuing to read 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).

### LAKE MICHIGAN AREA

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

### DALLAS CATHEDRAL

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

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STOP PRESS: Omitted in error from the Book Auction list:

38. Essays Presented to Charles Williams. OUP, 1947. £24.00