

The Charles Williams Society

Newsletter

CW

No. 84

READING GROUP NEWS:

OXFORD

We are continuing to read through the plays, most recently *Terror of Light*. For more information, please contact either Anne Scott (Oxford 553897) or Brenda Boughton (Oxford 515589).

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MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

8 November 1997: The Hon Secretary Gillian Lunn will speak on 'A Borrowed Harp': if possible, please bring copies of the Taliessin poems. The meeting will start at 2.30 pm, in the Church Room of St Matthew's Church, St Petersburg Place, Bayswater (nearest Underground stations Queensway and Bayswater). N.B. There is not much heating in the Church Room - if the weather is cold, dress warmly.

28 February 1998: The Hon. Librarian Brian Horne will speak on a subject to be announced. 2.30 pm in St. Matthew's Church Room.

6 June 1998: Annual General Meeting at 12.00 noon in the Frederic Hood Room, Pusey House, St. Giles, Oxford: to be followed at 2.30 pm by a meeting at which Barbara Reynolds will speak on 'Charles Williams and Dorothy L. Sayers'.

14 November 1998: Speaker to be announced. 2.30 pm in St. Matthew's Church Room.

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OFFICERS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

Chairman: Mrs Eileen Mable, 28 Wroxham Way, Harpenden, Herts AL5 4PP (tel: 01582-713641)

Secretary: Mrs Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London N3 1TL (tel: 0181-346-6025)

Treasurer: Richard Jeffery, Lothlorien, Harcourt Hill, Oxford OX2 9AS (tel: 01865-248922)

Membership Secretary: Mrs Lepel Kornicka, 15 Kings Avenue, Ealing, London W5 2SJ (tel: 0181-991-0321)

Librarian: Dr Brian Horne, Flat 8, 65 Cadogan Gardens, London SW3 2RA (tel: 0171-581-9917)

Acting Newsletter Editor: Andrew Smith, 41 Essex Street, Oxford OX4 3AW (tel: 01865-727470)

THE HON. CHAIRMAN WRITES:

There are two vacancies among the Society's officers.

Gillian Lunn announced at the AGM that she wishes to retire as the Society's Secretary and would like to hand over to her successor not later than the 1998 AGM. Gillian has been Secretary since 1980 and has made a tremendous contribution to the Society's life and work during that time, both as Secretary and as a friend to so many of us. We owe her much gratitude and thanks.

Andrew Smith has now resigned as Editor of the Newsletter. Andrew produced his first Newsletter in the summer of 1994. He has given us lively and informative Newsletters, professional in content and appearance. We are very grateful to him for all his hard work and effort. He has agreed to look after the Newsletter until his successor is appointed but we should not impose upon him any longer than is necessary.

Brief details of both vacancies are given below.

THE SECRETARY is responsible for much of the Society's administration and deals with its correspondence and enquiries. A typewriter or word-processor is essential.

THE NEWSLETTER EDITOR is responsible for the production and distribution of the Society's Newsletter. A typewriter can be used but a word-processor (and, if possible, a printer) is preferable. Because of likely future developments, familiarity with the Internet would also be an asset.

I should like to see both these positions filled as soon as possible. Will anyone who is interested and would like further information please get in touch with me. Gillian and Andrew will also be happy to tell you about their work.

Eileen Mable

A NEW MEMBER

A warm welcome is extended to

Mr. Bryan Glum, 3767 McLellan Road, Campbell River, B.C. V9H
IK2, Canada.

THE SOCIETY'S ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 1997

The Society held its AGM on Saturday May 31st 1997 at 12 noon at the Church Room, St. Matthew's, Bayswater, London. The meeting was chaired by Eileen Mable. Apologies were received from John Lewis, Huw Mordecai, Martin Moynihan, Hilda Pallan, Anne Ridler, Andrew Smith, Anne Spalding, Ruth Spalding, and Molly Switek. Reports were

presented by the Hon. Sec., the Hon. Librarian, the Hon. Treasurer, on behalf of the Newsletter Editor, by the Hon. Membership Secretary and the Hon. Chairman.

Gillian Lunn, Hon. Sec., reported on the death during last year of Charles Hadfield, whose unparalleled work in setting up the Society has already been appreciated in a Newsletter. She spoke more fully of Thelma Shuttleworth whose death occurred on 8th May and who, before illness confined her at home, played an incomparable part as a member and whose knowledge of CW from the 1920s made her a uniquely valuable help to students and those writing about him. She gave unstintingly of her information, wise counsel and friendship. Arrangements for Society meetings in 1998 are proceeding and will be announced in the Newsletter. Our membership of the Alliance of Literary Societies has produced much information, displayed to members at the AGM. Member Richard Sturch's achievement in gaining the title MASTERMIND 1996 was notable; his knowledge of CW's life and works (and ours, in providing the questions and answers for the BBC) helped him to win. All public mention of CW's name helps to make him better known, and it was good to see him quoted in the *Times* First Leader on the eve of Trinity Sunday.

Gillian Lunn informed the AGM that, having been Hon. Sec. since 1980, it is, for various reasons, time for her to plan resignation from office; she hopes a replacement may be found during the coming year.

Brian Horne, Hon. Librarian, who brought a selection of rare CW titles to the AGM for members' interest, from the Reference Library, reported that, though it is not being much used at present, he is much encouraged that it is now being catalogued.

Richard Jeffery, Hon. Treasurer, presented the accounts up to 28th Feb. 1997. The Society's finances are 'healthy' with assets at that date of £4,223.05. At the end of May £5,500 was paid to the Society as part of our legacy from the late Charles Hadfield; a further payment of £1,000-£2,000 will follow. Discussion was invited at this point and members 'from the floor' agreed that some, at least, of this money should be wisely spent, not hoarded. The Hon. Treasurer pointed out that, with assets (as they will be) of more than £10,000, we will be required to supply fuller details to the Charity Commission. Brian Horne moved to accept the accounts, Anne Scott seconded; the accounts were accepted and signed.

Newsletter Editor: Andrew Smith being absent, the Hon. Chairman spoke on his behalf; he has decided that he must resign the Editorship. From the floor appreciation of his work was expressed and shared by all;

Stephen Medcalf remarked that the Newsletter, in appearance and content 'now looks like an academic journal, which it is.'

Lepel Kornicka, Membership Secretary, reported that the Society has 137 members (136 last year): 87 in the UK, 50 overseas. 30 UK members pay by bankers' order. She reported Council's decision that 29 people whose payments are now two years overdue should receive, with the next Newsletter, letters telling them that it is their last.

Eileen Mable, Hon. Chairman, after thanking those officers who have announced their resignations, also thanked Richard Wallis for his work, over many years, in organising the London Reading Group. At present the only functioning Reading Group is the Oxford one. The Chairman reported Council's recent decision that one meeting of the Society, each year, shall be in Oxford. The Society's next big event would be the Conference on July 19/20; formal arrangements were complete.

The following members were re-elected to the Council: Eileen Mable (Chairman), Gillian Lunn (Secretary), Brian Horne (Librarian), Richard Jeffery (Treasurer), Lepel Kornicka (Membership Secretary), Brenda Boughton, John Heath-Stubbs and Anne Scott. Richard Sturch was elected to Council, nominated by Gillian Lunn and seconded by Brian Horne.

Under **Any Other Business** Brian Horne thanked Eileen Mable for chairing the Council during the past year. Discussion resumed about possible uses of funds: Stephen Medcalf suggested reprinting the novels, Gillian Lunn said other CW titles are harder to obtain; the costs of any reprinting would be considerable. Gavin Ashenden told the meeting of the interest in CW among some Internet users. He felt sure there would be interest in some Newsletter material; new members might come that way. Though the Society's details are available on display, members present who use the Net felt that some Society money might wisely be used on equipment; it was noted that further regular bills for use would ensue. It clearly needs informed consultation and Brian Horne's suggestion of reconvening the group that met last year at his flat was gratefully accepted.

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 1 pm.

Gillian Lunn

BRIEF REPORT OF A COUNCIL MEETING 31 MAY 1997

Among matters discussed were: arrangements for Society meetings in 1998; the re-auction of some books still unsold from Thelma

to increase membership; authorisation of notification to those members whose subscriptions are two years overdue that their names will be removed from the list; a new membership brochure; details of the forthcoming conference.



THELMA SHUTTLEWORTH

On May 8th, with the death of Thelma Shuttleworth, the Charles Williams Society lost not only one of the few remaining personal links with Charles Williams, but one of the most loyal and colourful members of the society. From its beginning in 1975, at St. Katharine's Foundation in the East End of London, Thelma rarely missed a meeting. Even in old age, when walking was difficult and she was in severe pain, she would arrive at meetings full of laughter and reminiscences to renew old acquaintances and make new friends.

She was born in South London in the second year of Edward VII's reign - on the 6th of December, 1902 - and friends will remember the vividness with which she would recall the life of Edwardian England. Her father died when she was a child and, the family being in straitened financial circumstances, she was sponsored to the London Orphan School at Watford where she became Head Girl. She was clearly an intelligent and quick-witted girl with a prodigious memory and a passion for life in all its variety. School completed, she proceeded to Teacher Training College. A love of learning - especially English Literature - remained with her to the end. Like her beloved Charles Williams, she could recite hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lines of verse - and with as much enthusiasm, enunciating the words with great precision and filling her voice with the passionate love that she had of fine poetry. Her first job as a teacher was at a London County Council Elementary School; later she was to take a more difficult post at an Approved School. After school-hours she attended evening classes at the New Park Road Evening Institute; and it was there that she met the man who was to shape her intellectual and imaginative life more than any other: Charles Williams, who was delivering some of his famous lectures on English poetry. They formed a close and loving friendship of which many letters are the remaining touching testimony. One of the most interesting things about Thelma was her attitude to Charles Williams. It was clear she admired him as much

the world, but she could be quite sharp about him, and, from time to time, very critical, not only of his behaviour, but also that of the many women who fell under his spell. She had no time for 'swooping and drooping'. This hard core of common sense and her keen awareness of the ridiculous were two of the most attractive facets of her character. She often used to say: 'the marvellous thing about love is that it is so useful'. When she used the word 'love' she gave it a very precise and profound meaning. But one must not forget her outspokenness and her bravery: during the Second World War both she and her husband were conscientious objectors and were imprisoned for their views. In 1931 she joined the Streatham Shakespeare Players and there she met the actor Bertie Shuttleworth whom she married and to whom she was devoted: she was always proud of his achievements in the theatre and spoke of them with warmth and affection many times. Their marriage, whatever ups and downs it may have had, always seemed to me to be a kind of marvel: so different from one another and yet so complementary. (His care for her in the last painful and anxious years of her life was also a kind of marvel.) Her enthusiasm for Charles Williams remained undimmed to the end; and it was to his poetry that she was most attuned. 'You will never understand anything about Charles unless you see that he is a *poet*', she used to say. She lived the poetry - or perhaps she allowed the poetry to inhabit her. The founding of the society gave her great joy and brought into her life friends who shared her love of Williams's work. The brightness of her presence has sometimes been the most vivid recollection that one has had of a meeting: her laughter and naughtiness frequently dispelled an inappropriately solemn mood. She gave much to the society and she will be greatly missed.

IN THE WEB OF EXCHANGE. UNDER THE MERCY.

Brian Horne.

At the AGM I had, sadly, the duty of reporting Thelma Shuttleworth's death the previous month. I have been asked to put what I said into writing, as a sort of supplement to Brian Horne's obituary.

After paying tribute to her incomparable help to the Society as a whole, and to scholars and researchers of Charles Williams' life and work, I recalled the first time I met Thelma. I had just joined the Society, in 1977, and it was my first attendance at a meeting, which was held at St.

porch (not then knowing that the wonderful Gateway just down the hill was CW's old school). A number of other people were also sheltering in the porch; then along came this bustling twinkling lady in a splendid hat, shaking the rain from her umbrella. She looked about and got her eye on me - how did she guess that alone among the little wet collection of people I was a new member of the Society? - and she advanced towards me declaiming "Taliessin for the Household" in hopeful, enquiring tones. And I became her slave for ever! In her long life I was only a small part at nearly the closing stages but she enfolded me, my family, our doings and of course especially my doings with the Society. As a member of the London Reading Group she sometimes couldn't get a train from home early enough to reach the Sunday afternoon meetings. Several times she stayed with us, arriving on the Saturday, and I have delightful memories of a summer outing to Kenwood, tea by the fire with a crashing thunderstorm outside (how Thelma loved chocolate cake!) and of wine-glowing firelit suppers. She became well-loved in my family. Her help to me as Secretary of the Society was incalculable. Her eager interest in everything was never bossy, always unstinting, always kind, almost always helpful and often absolutely invaluable. She was indeed a splendid person.

Gillian Lunn.



At a Society meeting on 15 February 1997, Glen Cavaliero spoke on 'Two Versions of Merlin'. We are pleased to be able to present the text of his address here.

Towards the end of C.S. Lewis's novel *That Hideous Strength* (a book much influenced by the novels of Charles Williams) a telling comparison is made between what the author calls 'Britain' and what he calls 'Logres'.

...something we may call Britain is always haunted by something we may call Logres. Haven't you noticed that we are two countries? ... a nation of poets and a nation of shopkeepers; the home of Sidney - and of Cecil Rhodes.¹

This idea of a Hidden History or a Sacred History, a sacramental view of secular history in which a sacred substance manifests itself through

¹ *That Hideous Strength* (1945) Chapter 17.iv.

his self-styled Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church; it has its origin in the Sacred History constituted by the Old Testament Scriptures; in the concept of *Kerygma* of the Gospels; and in the Patristic interpretation of the Scriptures in their totality as being the portrayal of a sacred history operative outside of time and which embraces time within itself. The more specific concentration of the notion in an ideal or 'Platonic' Britain (to use Coleridge's phrase) is to be found in the writings of such diverse figures as William Blake, Arthur Machen, Charles Williams, David Jones and Geoffrey Hill.

All the writers mentioned above have their committed admirers, and Blake at any rate enjoys classic status as a prophetic figure who has exercised a powerful influence on the thinking of twentieth-century writers. But his writings (even the deceptive simplicities of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*) fall all too readily into the category of the esoteric, and that term may be applied in terms of explicit content to Machen, and to Jones and Hill in their literary methodology - and to Charles Williams to some extent in both. An on-going literary problem makes itself evident here. How to make the language of Logres intelligible in Britain?

I want to consider the efforts made towards resolving that difficulty in the diametrically contrasted work of two writers, one Christian, the other an agnostic pagan, who were aware of the questions behind it, and who sought to resolve it in their imaginative writing. A book could well be written comparing and contrasting the outlooks of Charles Williams and John Cowper Powys; but for purposes of a preliminary exploration let us concentrate on their contrasting treatments of the enigmatic figure of Merlin, who may be called the heart of the Matter of Logres, and thus of Britain.

As long ago as 1927 E.K. Chambers could assert with scholarly exactitude that Merlin as we have come to know him was the invention of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the twelfth-century author of the highly popular and influential *History of the Kings of Britain*.² But it was the *historicizing* of Merlin which Geoffrey sought to establish: for in origin he is a figure out of Logres, a compound figure emerging out of Celtic folklore and mythology, even, possibly, with origins outside of these islands altogether. It was characteristic of Charles Williams's literary perspective that he should envisage Merlin's evolving role in the

² *Arthur of Britain* (1927) p.95

right. The offspring of a nun and an elemental, Merlin is a figure whose origins are in the strictest sense of the term mysterious: his role is not merely that of an actor within the Matter of Britain, he is a being who operates outside it, but who is the carrier of an age-old secret as to its true nature.

Charles Williams renews this Merlin theme in terms of a Divine Providence. Williams's Scotist theology (the contention that there would have been an Incarnation even had there been no Fall) is at the back of his portrayal of the mystery of creation in terms of form, structure, ritual - everything that he means by his vision of an ordered, organically functioning Empire of Byzantium. In *Taliessin through Logres* Merlin is an instrument of order. He is young, the shape of the future, time's metre - that is to say, the pace of things, the prescribed rhythm and order of things, the measure of law. In 'The Vision of the Empire' Merlin *defines* reality; in 'The Calling of Arthur' he embodies the kingdom ('Now am I Camelot; now am I to be builded'). In 'The Crowning of Arthur' he *watches* 'the beasts of Broceliande, the fish of Nimue,/ hierarchic, republican, the glory of Logres,/ patterns of the Logos in the depth of the sun.' In 'The Son of Lancelot' he acts: his magic has become remedial.

Williams's Merlin is openly and supremely a magician: here, as in *The Region of the Summer Stars*, he practises magical rites - rites, however, that are but the necessary instruments of his role within the Will of the Emperor. His spells are impersonal, functional, purposeful, for 'Magic throws no truck with dreams.' He is the child of Nimue, of Broceliande, and the twin of Brisen, who is space as he is time, male and female principles being 'parthenogenetical in Broceliande.' Williams brilliantly describes the magical dimension from which Merlin comes in 'Taliessin's Letter to a Princess of Byzantium' in *The Advent of Galahad*.³ And in 'The Calling of Taliessin' from *The Region of the Summer Stars* he 'prepares the ambiguous rite for every chance'. He reconciles Providence with human free-will. Charles Williams's Merlin is an Apollonian figure, an instrument of order, a master of intellect, an obedient Lucifer arising out of a moral hinterland of physical neutrality.

This hinterland is clearly defined by C.S. Lewis in *That Hideous Strength*. '[Merlin] is the last vestige of an old order in which matter and spirit were, from our modern point of view, confused ... Merlin represents

³ David Llewellyn Dodds, ed. *Arthurian Poets: Charles Williams* (1991) p.186

what we've got to get back to in some different way.⁴ The didactic tone (the Achilles heel in Lewis's literary persona and an infirmity he shares with the equally pedagogic Auden) ensures that in this instance, while he understands the nature of mystery, he is not among those who can effortlessly convey the sense of its presence. But that understanding can be precise: witness such a further comment as 'I often wonder whether Merlin doesn't represent the last trace of something the later tradition has quite forgotten about - something that became impossible when the only people in touch with the supernatural were either white or black, either priests or sorcerers.'⁵

It is the quest for some such sense of earthly magic that one finds in the novels of John Cowper Powys. Born fourteen years before Williams and outliving him by seventeen more, he was, like him, a writer who worked in a variety of literary fields - novels, popular philosophy, poetry, literary essays, autobiographies and diaries; and like Williams he was mighty orator. Having between 1932 and 1942 published four masterly and lengthy novels, variously treating of magical themes, he then proceeded to tackle the figure of Merlin. *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), *Weymouth Sands* (1934), *Maiden Castle* (1936) and *Owen Glendower* (1941) all contain magician figures of one kind or another; and now in his seventies Powys produced his enormous *Porius: A Romance of the Dark Ages* (1951).⁶ The action takes place within a single week in October AD 499, and is set in North Wales near the author's home at Corwen: it is a novel that invokes the past of the place in which it is being written - space and time are conflated in the very act of composition. Among the large cast of characters are Arthur, Taliessin, Nimue, Mordred, Galahad, all of them quite different from their embodiments in Williams's *Arthuriad*; and most memorable of these re-castings is Merlin, called here by his Welsh name of Myrddyn Wyllt. Nikolai Tolstoy described Powys's portrayal as 'the authentic Merlin of the earliest traditions, grotesque and awe-inspiring; and the novel itself represents an astonishing *tour de force*, an exploration into the dark recesses of human thought.'⁷ It is indeed an astonishing book - learned, homely, yet saturated in a sense of remoteness in time

⁴ *op. cit.* Chapter 13.iv

⁵ *ibid.* Chapter 1.v

⁶ *Porius* was first published in an abridged form, at a publisher's insistence. The full original text was published by Colgate University Press in 1994.

⁷ *The Quest for Merlin* (1985) p.18

with an overwhelming immediacy of space.

Lewis anticipated the world of *Porius* in a marvellous description of Merlin's ambience, 'the wet, tangled endless weeds, silted with the accumulated decays of autumns that had been dropping leaves since before Britain was an island; wolves slinking, beavers building, wide shallow marshes, dim horns and drummings, eyes in the thickets, eyes of men not only pre-Roman but pre-British, ancient creatures, unhappy and dispossessed, who became the elves and ogres and wood-woses of the later tradition ... Little strongholds with unheard-of kings. Little colleges and covens of Druids.'⁸ Powys domesticated this world, Druids and all, in a specific moment in time; and he mixes the magical and marvellous with the closely naturalistic and relatively humdrum in a kind of unworldly sophistication that is peculiarly his own. Here is Myrddin Wyllt seen as the novel's hero, the young Romano-Brythonic chieftain Porius, first encounters him.

The man, who in that mist looked like a herdsman from the south, spoke in a low, hoarse, guttural whisper, like someone who had given up for long years the gift of human speech. He was clothed in a shaggy coat of coarse wool that descended below his knees, but under this, twisting round his legs and reaching from his ankles half-way to his thighs, he wore rough cow-hide leggings bleached and stained by weather ... A strangely black beard was tucked inside his sheep-wool coat, and under his black bristly eyebrows his eyes in the darkness looked like the bosses of two metal shields seen on their concave or interior side ... The man's head was bare of everything but a crop of coal-black hair, and his ears were the largest appendages of that kind that Porius had ever seen ... his eyes were unnaturally circular in shape and so close together that when they flashed with an interior light ... they created the illusion that they actually mingled with each other and became one.⁹

Powys's Merlin is not so much a man with magical powers as magical himself with the magic of the earth; more, he is the embodiment of the god Cronos or Saturn - Time - who, having been supplanted by the sky-god Zeus, the god of rationality of and power, awaits his resurrection in the Age of Gold. Porius, holding Myrddin Wyllt in his arms, feels that this multiple entity was weak and helpless in his grasp; and yet it was so much more enduring than himself that it awed him even while he dominated it ... In it was the dark greenness of leafy hollows and the dim passivity of ancient tree trunks and the long endurance of rocks piled dumbly upon rocks; and yet there was in it too the fluttering of huge imprisoned wings and the coiling of great

⁸ *That Hideous Strength*, Chapter 11.i

⁹ *Porius* (1951) Chapter 3

ancient tree trunks and the long endurance of rocks piled dumbly upon rocks; and yet there was in it too the fluttering of huge imprisoned wings and the coiling of great serpents and the feverish relaxings of feline sinews, and under it all the hushed growth of green mosses, yellow funguses, grey lichens, drawing their sustenance from the innumerable nipples of leaf-mould and from the darkly scented pores of ribbed peat, and from the crumbling rubble of sandstone.¹⁰

Myrddin Wyllt is powerless against the military and political forces of the world; indeed, having deliberately foregone power, he has become the representative and champion of the victims, of all the oppressed. One magical act he does perform - he turns the owl Blodeuwedd back into a woman, undoing the vengeance upon her of the Apollonian enchanter-god Gwydion, who was responsible for her creation - Powys draws here upon the fourth branch of the *Mabinogion*. Women play an active role in *Porius*, a novel in which the female principle of space predominates. Powys's Nineue is closer to Tennyson's Vivien than she is to Williams's Nimue, and seems to embody the self-serving use of the imagination - to the extent that anyone can be called an embodiment in Powys's world. Myrddin allows her to imprison him beneath a stone on the summit of Snowdon - but in order that Porius, in delivering him, may be initiated into an acceptance of life in its totality, without prescriptive rules, accepting its chaos as being the nature of reality itself.

For all its primitive setting and 'romantic' ingredients, *Porius* is an intellectual novel, almost an anti-dramatic novel. Accordingly it is to *A Glastonbury Romance* that one must turn for a dramatised presentation of Merlin in relation to the contemporary world. In this novel the evangelical preacher John Geard (known locally as Bloody Johnny on account of his repeated references to the Blood of Christ) is a wonder-worker who believes that he is called to institute a new religious cult on the site where Joseph of Arimathea brought the Holy Grail to Britain. But Geard is anything but a dogmatist, anything but religious in the orthodox sense, and, like Myrddin Wyllt after him, he displays complete powerlessness and passivity at times of crisis. Yet he can bring a dead woman back to life, and in an extraordinary scene in an ancient manor house, in a room haunted by the spirit of Merlin, he reaches out to the dead magician in compassion for his obsession with Nineue, and in the process takes on that prophet's function. But Geard ends by seeking the otherworld in death, merging himself with the floodwaters of his mother

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the floodwaters of his mother the earth, and in so doing giving his life that his adversary, the materialistic industrialist, may live: Logres sacrifices itself for Britain.

In *A Glastonbury Romance* John Cowper Powys does not apply the Arthurian myth to a plot that is subordinate to it; rather, he permits the realities it represents to break through into the lives of the various characters. He creates a spiritual world which is constantly accompanied by moments of humdrum reality: his epiphanies frequently occur in incongruous circumstances, as when Excalibur is glimpsed beside the decomposing body of a cat, or as when Sam Dekker, having had a vision of the Holy Grail, proceeds to administer an enema to an elderly man. Powys shares Williams's awareness of the inter-relatedness of the sacred and profane; but unlike him he refuses to celebrate the spiritual universe as a controlling absolute.

John Geard is a Merlin figure who would usher in a golden age of tolerance, compassion, kindness. He is gross, obstinate, unpredictable, disrespectfully humorous, but there is no evil in him. He eases the pain of a woman suffering from cancer by quite simply going to bed with her.

'Take thik lamp away, one o'ye, if ye doan't mind. No! No! Put the little buggar on the floor, Missus, where woan't shine in our poor eyes.' ... 'Now, Tittie, old gurl, thee and me be agoin to have some blessed sleep. I be drowsy as a spent bullick, i be. Night to ye both; night to ye all. Tittie and me be all right. Us 'ull be safe and sound till mornin'. And then maybe ye'll bring up a cup o'tea for we to bless the Lord in!'¹¹

In Powys's world Merlin is not the masterly figure controlling human destiny whom Williams gives us; and yet precisely because he is victim and compassionate fellow-sufferer with the afflicted, champion of the dispossessed and enemy of the powers who rule the world, he does approximate to a Christ figure, though incorporating a broader range of mythical ideas and human associations than does the Jesus of contemporary piety. To quote Nikolai Tolstoy again,

Merlin [is] to be seen as Trickster and Master of Beasts, Lord of the Wild Hunt, psychopomp and devil; and, emerging from the wilderness chaos, the Incarnation of Divinity, Guardian of the Grail, and sacrificial Saviour and Victim.¹²

For John Cowper Powys the Absolute can never be embodied; for him 'no one Receptacle of Life and no one Fountain of Life poured into that

¹¹ *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932) Chapter 10

¹² *op. cit.* p.120

Receptacle can contain or explain what the world offers us.' But although he sees no answer to the riddle of life, he does seek out a way to attune oneself to the *reality* of life. Life is a mystery to be entered into, not a puzzle to be solved. Williams would have agreed with him on that.

In *Porius Myrddin Wyllt* is delivered from a Nineue who is a particular, powerful woman with whom he is in some sense in collusion. In *Taliessin through Logres* Merlin returns to Nimue as the female principle of nature. Whereas Powys makes Myrddin's deliverance partly a matter of chance - Nineue is not able to attract his rescuer, Porius - Williams makes Merlin's deliverance the fulfilment of his destiny, a return to the place from which he came, his mission accomplished. He is joined by the two Josephs, the guardians of birth and death, 'twin suns of womb and tomb'; and birth and death alternate as 'the blessed young sorceror, a boy and less than a boy' goes *spinning* into 'the heart's simultaneity of repose.' That word 'spin' has a dual meaning. In terms of space it means to *revolve*; it suggests eternal recurrence. In terms of time it means to *evolve*: the Fates are the spinners of human destiny. In both Williams's and Powys's very different visions, time and space are one.

These two writers may be at opposite poles, appearing to contradict each other; but they also represent respectively the Apollonian and the Dionysian elements in human outlook and experience. Powys's Merlin represents No Order - and no ordering: things as they existentially are. Williams's Merlin represents Order which involves reciprocity: things as they essentially are. Both writers dissociate themselves from any possibility that the Absolute can be *known* definitively, but both voice a belief in the possibility that it can be *experienced*. In this they validate their credentials as artists, albeit artists of differing temperaments and literary styles. Powys has *his* Taliessin in *Porius* voicing a belief in 'The Answer to all things that yet answers nothing' - a phrase worth pondering. But so also is 'This also is Thou: neither is this Thou.' And on an occasion like the present it seems courteous to afford the wisdom of Charles Williams the final word.

(c) Glen Cavalerio.

DISCUSSION

John Heath-Stubbs said it was interesting that CW, Powys and T.H. White all connected Merlin with time, the personification of which as Cronos/Chronos is linked with the British Isles as far back as Plutarch's *De Defectu Oraculorum*, where Cronos is described as sleeping in an

island cave. CW and White latched onto the association independently, though CW's Merlin owes something to Blake's Los. Glen Cavaliero replied that the Age of Gold and sleeping gods were important to Powys, and referred to the sleeping rulers of the Golden Age below all else in *Morwyn*. John Heath-Stubbs mentioned the possible connexion between Cronos and Greek words for crow or raven: there may be a link with the Welsh figure of Bran, whose name also means 'raven'. The speaker said that Powys makes this connexion in *Porius*, drawing on the writings of Sir John Rhys. Richard Jefferies mentioned 'The Calling of Arthur' where the appearance of Merlin suggested the mad Merlin of Welsh tradition, and resembled an Old Testament prophet. Glen Cavaliero said that CW was sacralising the political history of Geoffrey of Monmouth. John Heath-Stubbs observed that the Welsh 'Myrddin' should have appeared in Latin as 'Merdinus', but to avoid unwanted connotations (Latin *merda*, French *merde*) Geoffrey had altered this to 'Merlinus'.

Stephen Medcalf talked of the various ways in which the polarisation between Britain and Logres could be worked: Logres could have vanished (as in 'The Last Voyage'), it could be opposed to Britain, or the two could be interdependent. The divergence into black and white was most marked in C.S. Lewis. Glen Cavaliero said CW and Powys don't want to sever the two. Williams celebrates the built City, whereas Powys has all this happening in individuals. He demolishes mythologies but sees them as helping people to live. Powys is a *practical* writer, as witness *The Art of Happiness*. The speaker referred the scene in *A Glastonbury Romance* with John Crow on Pomparles Bridge looking at the dead cat: it is at the very moment when he thinks 'this is life' that he experiences the vision of the flung sword. The synchronising of the two serves to earth the mythology. When Glen Cavaliero first read *A Glastonbury Romance* he 'nearly went mad': he wanted shape and art, whereas Powys was continually subverting the expectation. So Geard's shout to Merlin is preceded by a mention of the chamberpot: Powys is against sentimentalising. Stephen Medcalf contrasted the Pomparles incident with the filthy river in *All Hallows Eve* which is transformed or glorified. Glen Cavaliero said Powys will give you the mess and leave you to go on with it. John Heath-Stubbs recalled the incident in *War in Heaven* where the Graal is thrown out of a lavatory window: when he had told T.S. Eliot that he thought this indecorous, Eliot had rebuked him, saying, 'There's absolutely nothing you can do with people like that'.

Brian Horne observed how different the two kinds of magic were in the

Taliessin poems and the novels. The speaker replied that in the novels CW was concerned with good and evil - dualism makes good drama. At the time he was still close to the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, and using first-hand knowledge. It was biographical speculation, but when CW gave this up, did he react and give it a bad name? He could be seen as exorcising the 'power and manipulation' of occultism through the figure of Merlin. Powys believed that he had magical powers: both he and CW were 'psychic magnets'. Occultist books were dreadfully dull. Glen Cavaliero had read one 'out of bravado'. It was not a work of imagination: there was no free development, merely lists, diagrams, structures of power. Brian Horne said that the magic in the Taliessin poems was natural, from the earth: there wasn't the same link to occultism. Glen Cavaliero mentioned Merlin's shape-shifting, and referred to Nikolai Tolstoy's *The Quest for Merlin* for the figure of Merlin as trickster.

Eileen Mable asked where a newcomer to Powys should start. The speaker said the first problem was finding copies. Powys's novels were all out of print, but *A Glastonbury Romance* was as good a way in as any. The opening page was a shattering blow to any expectation of realism: a mass of suppositious metaphysics was fired at you. But beyond that, there was description and humour, if you let Powys take you with him without your critical hat. John Heath-Stubbs couldn't recommend *Wolf Solent*, which he hadn't been able to finish: he had started with *Porius*. Eileen Mable had begun with *Wolf Solent* and been 'absolutely gripped'. The days when a Powys enthusiast, operating as the Village Press, reprinted almost everything were fondly recalled. Richard Jeffery asked whether the full version of *Porius* was worth getting. The speaker said it was if one could afford it: the reader was much more aware of a shape to the book.

Stephen Medcalf then thanked the speaker for a talk delivered with learning and persuasiveness. A previous encounter with the early pages of *A Glastonbury Romance* had moved him to an exclamation once (so Compton Mackenzie) common in Oxford: 'Oh, shut up, fish-face!' Fortified by the speaker's assurances, he would persevere next time.



CHARLES WILLIAMS AND HUBERT FOSS

Anne Ridler writes:

Society members will recall that in the late 1920s Charles Williams wrote two Masques for performance in the Library at Amen House in the presence of Humphrey Milford ('Caesar') and invited guests. CW himself took part as the 'Introducer', and Hubert Foss, head of the Press Music Department ('Thyrsis'), who had collaborated with him in planning the Masques, composed the music and accompanied the productions on the piano. His wife, Dora Stevens, was 'The Singer', and the other parts were played by CW's colleagues: Phyllis Jones (later MacDougall), Gerard Hopkins, Frederick Page, Helen Peacock and Nina Condren.

Hubert Foss had been instrumental in founding the Music Department in 1923, and now his daughter, Mrs Diana Sparkes, is planning to celebrate the 75th anniversary by a private performance of the two Masques next summer at the University Press building in Walton Street, Oxford, and to have the musical scores printed, for library use. An 'Appreciation' of Charles Williams written by her mother, and the other items, are printed here with her kind permission.

Hubert, of course, knew Charles Williams for many years, as Charles had already been on the staff of the Oxford University Press for some years when Hubert went there. My own first meetings with him were in connection with the production of the first of the Masques which he wrote for the Amen House staff. This Masque, the *Masque of the Manuscript*, was first performed on April 29th, 1927. Hubert wrote the music for it, simple and tuneful for the greater part. A song, *The Carol of Amen House*, difficult, both musically and vocally, was interpolated, and I was asked to sing this. I do not know if Hubert asked Charles to write this carol or if it was part of the original scheme of the Masque. If he *did* write it especially for me it was a great and understanding kindness to both of us, as it brought me into the world of Amen House. I did not appear before the audience, but sang from behind a screen. Charles and everyone else treated me with the greatest friendliness, and I was never made to feel an intruder. I am simply called 'the singer' in the tiny programme.

Hubert had no mean part in the Masque. As Master of the Music, he not only composed it, but played it and even sang some of it. None of the performers was a musician, so the vocal line had to be basically extremely simple, using nursery rhymes (e.g. 'Baa baa black sheep'), and simple original melodies. By accompanying them with ingenious and varied

harmonies, there was no sense of monotony. (It is interesting to note that during the rehearsals and performances of a revival of the Masques in 1955, the very musical participants adored the music, as did the audience.)

Hubert loved Charles dearly and had an enormous admiration for him and his poetry, though he owned he could not follow Charles's mind into the mysteries wherein he was completely at home. They had a relationship in which Hubert loved and accepted all Charles's gentle and not so gentle mockery as demonstrations of affection, as indeed they were.

Charles was unique. If I say he radiated goodness, it sounds priggish, and he never gave any impression of priggishness, but there was an aura around him that seemed to embrace everyone. In appearance he was tall and gracefully angular.

Apart from writing the music to the *Masque of the Manuscript*, Hubert wrote the music for the second Masque, the *Masque of Perusal*. Again the simplest music, but extraordinarily effective. This Masque was performed in 1929 when I was recovering from TB. Hubert's letters to me at Mundesley Sanatorium in the early part of 1929 are full of references to the rehearsals.

Hubert's other literary connections with Charles were in the production of the beautiful edition of *Heroes and Kings* which Hubert designed, and which was published by the Sylvan Press. It was bound in scarlet coarsely woven silk and stamped with a golden design of a crown surmounting an archway from which, apparently, is suspended a sword, and illustrated by Norman Janes. Later Hubert wrote a set of Shakespearean songs to be sung in Charles's *Myth of Shakespeare*.

Charles was unmusical, that is to say, he had no knowledge of its technical processes. It did not really interest him. He probably could not recognise a tune if he heard it a second time, but he was not impervious to it. For instance, the following poem, written, seemingly, after hearing a 'modern' cantata, shows that he had been definitely affected - and adversely - by what he had heard.

I think that I'll try and forget them;
I think that they haven't a chance;
I think a composer who set them
(they do these things better in France)
would show a mistaken i-de-a
of ideas used by music or verse;
I think they would anger a Shiah;
I think that they couldn't be worse.

I think that *that* isn't quite certain,
considering what mankind can do
(look at Elgar or Sandford and Merton),
but they are not intended for you;
I think that cantatas are poison
unless they arise from a mind
that is rich with a cultural foison;
this is deaf, dumb, lame, leprous and blind.

15 June 1926.

In 1930, he and his wife Michal came in to see us at Nightingale Corner, and we played and sang (probably among other things) Hubert's settings of Blake's 'Infant Joy', 'As I Walked Forth', and the 'Nurse's Song'. These poems he sent us later, and on reading them even now, I feel wonder and gratitude to Heaven that we - and Blake - should have been able to evoke such intensity of experience in Charles's mind.

Two poems 3 June 1930. For Dora and Hubert Foss.

I

Blake and you and the song and light
of the sky amid dark trees;
I saw Blake go by in the night
As a friend his friend sees.

His forehead was as the topmost sky,
full, strong and clear therewith
as the voice that sang while he went by,
his eyes upon his myth.

Outside the window I saw him pass
in the music I there looked on.
Half he glanced in through the glass
as he went by, and was gone.

But the whole room was full of Blake
and you and a voice and the light
which did not yet the heaven forsake
being in the song and the height.

II

How lovely music is!
All the fair animals of the forest came
running before a flame.
There was a fire in the forest; this
nor saw I nor felt -
but herd by herd, company by company,
beautiful things broke audibly:
the fair birds flew,
the fair beasts poured forth leaping in me,
towards the temporal hut wherein my heart had dwelt.
Hastily it withdrew,
fearing the overthrow of walls and roof,
hastily aloof.
All in a wonder, a grace of sound,
wild and ordered, fierce and uncontrolled,
broke the quick rushing movement around.
I was rapt to behold
the lives, the forest lives, the lives of my life,
forgetting their strife,
surge towards the hut that was once a heart; but O
as it shook its overthrow,
all stayed, all vanished, all ceased.
Bird and beast,
diverse multitudinous lives that came
hurrying, hurrying, hurrying from the flame
in the forest beyond my heart,
all that my thought spied
in the great incantation, the magical art,
vanished; the music died.

When the the OUP moved in 1939 to Southfield House in Oxford, Hubert and his depleted staff shared a converted bathroom, with Charles and his for about eight months until Hubert went back to London. I remember a thrilling 'reading' of *The Doctor's Dilemma* in Bartlemas, the house we had rented. I also remember an evening at Lady Margaret Hall when Charles recited Shakespeare and I sang English songs - to a small audience. I had not heard him recite - publicly, at any rate - before, and he made me completely lost to the outside world for the time. An experience never to be forgotten.

Hubert was deeply grieved when Charles died, and in later years I heard him say many times, 'If only Charles were here, I would ask him....'

To Thyrsis - on his book on Printing

Thyrsis, when in the night I lie awake
considering, somewhere about half-past two,
how very many things my friends can do,
and what intelligential marvels make,
doubtful if in the end my small heart ache
wholly with wonder or with envy too,
I come at last to meditate on you,
and then, content, myself to sleep betake.

For envy, Thyrsis, needs similitude
to work on; no similitude is here;
what, 'twixt a room with candlelight endued
and the large sky, illumined far and near,
where you in your activities are seen,
Phosphor and Hesper and all the stars between.

19 March 1927

Across the fosse, my Foss, that parts this world
from that of colour and disposed light
in movement by no rough displeasure swirled
to eddies of confusion and affright;
across the ditch where fantasy enisled
presents some lovely and melodious thing,
where snow and wolves pretend to haunt the wild
(itself pretended), whence the sleigh bells bring
new joy, new love, new laughter, and new song,
too swift to tire, too aery-sweet to cloy,
and a fair wrath is posed but to prolong
new song, new laughter, new love, and new joy:
across this fosse who lets the drawbridge down?
who but yourself, my Foss, and charms the town?

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