

The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

NO. 7, AUTUMN, 1977

ADDRESS GIVEN BY JOHN PELLOW TO A MEETING OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY
AT ST. ALBANS, ON 10TH SEPTEMBER, 1977.

(Reported by a member of the Society)

Mr. Chairman and fellow members of the Society: It gives me great pleasure and pride to address you as a citizen of the ancient City of London in Logres, now called St. Albans. It was one of our joys to have had Charles Williams in the city for 20 odd years.

He was a Londoner, born in London, and he claimed to be a Londoner. He was brought here at the age of eight, and he lived here until he married in 1917. He and his wife moved to Hampstead or rather Haverstock Hill, to a flat at the top of a tall house. In the Summer number of the News, I had some notice about C.W. I had written an article in a small paper for teachers in the labour interest, and I was allowed to write what I liked. Having just read Divorce, I took the opportunity to boost what I thought to be first-rate stuff. It coincided with a time when Charles himself was in a state of acute depression about the world generally. He was then in London. It was not till many years later that I became acquainted with his previous life in St. Albans, and met his beloved sister. She is not here today as she hoped to be.

I divide Williams' life into three phases: the first while living in St. Albans, and then his years in London, and finally the years at Oxford. I knew him during the second phase. For the first phase, young manhood and so on, we are dependent on the testimony of his sister and his old friend, George Robinson; they went to school together and to university. Williams' father, Walter, was a poor clerk, but a clerk has an ancient history and is part of a great tradition. After all, Caxton called Virgil "that great clerk", and happy is the family in which books are not merely held in honour but regarded as a prime interest of life. Walter had read quite widely and (because of failing sight) he had to be read to by his son. This meant that he was able to add something to his son's schooling. He was a master of the English language and would correct him. He encouraged the children to present plays at home with the assistance of their friend, George Robinson. C.W.'s sister, Edith, has told me of them. It was a privilege to listen to her dry humour. There seemed to have been an unusually strong bond between the two; I have been told that Charles, like all small boys, could be rude and rough, but that he was always gentle with his sister Edith. In a letter he once said that he learned more about mysticism from Edith than from any other person. They used to go for long country walks together.

Both in his poetry and the novels, the treatment of the countryside of Hertfordshire, which he knew so well, is rather vague. Although he mentioned specific places in Hertfordshire, they might be anywhere. There is no picture of the landscape. Only once does he fix you down to a particular, identifiable place, in Descent into Hell (the description in the first chapter). I could take you there. But of course it has changed: the big houses have been pulled down. He calls that particular district "Battle Hill". In fact there is a road called Battlefield Road, which refers to one of the two battles of St. Albans, and also someone was martyred there. But apart from that, the landscape is vague. At any rate, Charles was slightly short-sighted.

So there he was until his marriage. As a shy young man at some parish function, he met Florence Conway, called by Charles Magdalen, Michal. It is rather confusing to know whom one is talking about - mother or son, Michal or Michael. In due course they got married and went to London, to Hampstead. It was there, after a few months, that I visited them. I still remember the way he opened the front door, and the sweeping bow. I felt rather embarrassed and wanted to

laugh. He raced up that long staircase; it was one of those old Victorian houses, four or five storeys high. Then I was introduced to the duchess-like presence of Michal. Well, that was just the beginning. There was a torrent of talk - I never heard anything quite so brilliant. As everybody bears testimony, he encouraged you to talk, and you found you did talk better and more fluently. He regarded you as at least as intelligent as he. Then we exchanged visits, and then Michael junior came along. He could not be left at night; he had to be fetched and marched up and down on Charles' shoulder. He recited pages and pages of Milton to the poor child. He did not like it. He was very much more taken by Charles' own compositions. He even wrote a "Walking Song" (there is one in Windows of Night). I have an idea that he wrote a second one. Michal published two collections of verse for children and I think that this "Walking Song" is included in one of these. I know there was a game he played with chairs as trains, called "Come along to Harrow". (It was not Harrow but St. Albans). You could not carry on much intelligent conversation in an atmosphere like that, so we alternated meeting at his home to meeting for luncheon in Newgate Street, round the corner from Amen House. This continued until the early '30s.

He began to overload himself with his writing; he was writing for money. His salary at the Oxford Press was not very high. He was working himself almost to death. In about 1933 he had an operation, and it is about that time that I received a letter from him which I still have. It was written by a very sick man's hand. This was about the time of the operation, yet he did not mention that he was not well. He was working night and day, sitting up till all hours. He even descended to reviewing detective stories. The second London phase was over.

During the war he went to Oxford. He had quite a following at Magdalen. In October, 1940, he said, "I have been dragged from my beloved London and brought down to this provincial centre". But it was the same story again. He had his job at the Press, and then at Oxford he got all sorts of other jobs loaded on him, lectures, tutorials. He was writing regularly for Time and Tide. He began working himself to death as he had before. I remember Michal writing to me: "but how it will end, I don't know". When the end came it was a tremendous shock to most people who knew him. I was up in Blackpool at the time, and someone wrote to me, "had I seen The Times, the notice of his death". In John Wain's book, Sprightly Running, I came across a rather interesting account (I don't know the value of his work). It is a chapter about Oxford and he gives us a very good picture. He had become a popular figure among young undergraduates. It became all the thing to admit, or pretend to admit, that there was something in Christianity. "One day I was walking towards my usual pub, the 'Eagle and Child' when I met a friend just coming away from it. "Who's in there?" I asked. "Nobody much", he answered, "just the poet Williams and the theologian MacKinnon, disputing in a corner." John Wain goes on to describe another incident:

"It was the middle of the summer term, beautiful weather, with a stir of hopefulness in the air. I was walking from Longwall Street, where I lodged, towards St. John's, and had just reached the Clarendon Building when a girl, whom I knew by sight, came pedalling fast and agitatedly on her bicycle round the corner from New College Lane. 'John,' she called out, 'Charles Williams is dead'. She had never spoken to me before, and normally would have avoided using my Christian name. But this was a general disaster, like an air-raid, and the touch of comradeship was right. I asked her for details, but she knew nothing except that he was dead. In any case, she could not talk; she was only just not crying."

CHARLES WILLIAMS AS I KNEW HIM

by Ruth Spalding

In 1939 Dick Milford, then Vicar of the University Church in Oxford, asked me to direct Seed of Adam in St. Mary's. As I had never heard of Charles Williams, Dick lent me The Place of the Lion, and a copy of Christendom, an orange-coloured Journal of Christian Sociology, containing the play. Being captured - or released - by the novel and mystified by the play, I telephoned the author at Amen House, asking for help. The voice, with angular vowels of Hertfordshire mixed with something like Cockney, said: "My dear Miss Spalding, come round this afternoon!"

He explained the play by acting parts of it, striding round his office brandishing a paper knife. In Descent into Hell, Chapter 4, Stanhope says poetry should be spoken with "clarity, speed, humility, courage". To these, C.W. added a sense of the macabre, of the comic and of heaven, presented with bravura and astonishing enjoyment. He only asked that the actors should respect line-endings and his internal rhymes!

He and his wife, Michal, came for two performances. Afterwards he wrote: "I wish there was something else of mine that you could do! Take this as a tribute and not as anything else." This "wish" (in which I shared!) was soon granted. In the P.S. to a letter dated 8 August 1939 he wrote that "if by any chance" there was a war he would be moved to Oxford (with O.U.P.); did I know of any house where they could put someone up but did not want evacuated children? My sister Anne and I put the choice before our parents, who cabled from Saratoga Springs the memorable reply: "GREATLY PREFER CHARLES WILLIAMS ...". So Charles and Gerard Hopkins, known as "The Lodgers", came for the duration, with visits from Charles's wife and son; Charles remained at 9 South Parks Road until a few days before his death in hospital, in 1945.

When Martin Browne founded the Canterbury Pilgrim Players, he suggested I might start a similar touring company based on Oxford, which I did. On 14 October Charles (one of our Vice-Presidents), agreed to write us a play. Stalking elatedly round the room, thinking aloud, he created the plot for The House by the Stable. Then he dictated 24 lines in rhyming couplets and asked "Would this style of thing do for our purpose?" With brash courage I said "No." It must be in his finest style. On 26th October he gave me the script on one of his little note-pads, in his minute handwriting.

Dick Milford, who had started all this, asked if Charles would write a second play, making a double bill for St. Mary's. The MS. of The Death of Good Fortune is dated 10 November. Written in what he called "My more advanced style" it was one of his favourites. "Intellectuals" hinted that these plays would be too obscure for most audiences. Charles responded: "They are not obscure, he said peevishly!" and nor they were when acted in mining valleys or to evacuees, or in the deep shelters of East India Dock Road during the blitz.

Charles wrote Grab and Grace to complete this trilogy. Before that, for Whitsun 1940, he wrote Terror of Light, for a premier in the University Church. He spoke of rewriting it in verse. I sent him a comment on the play from the Vicar of St. John's, Penzance; Charles wrote back: "...I have never received a nicer compliment than to be told that Clement of Alexandria would have enjoyed it. I begin to think that among all our ascetics I, and I alone, upheld the great Alexandrian tradition of humanity. Everyone else has an overwhelming sense of the 'Spiritual' - more proper of course, but there should be a counter-weight."

Charles had helped me compile The House of David for performance in Churches where only Bible-words were allowed. Even that reflects his genius. (Entitled The Word, under the pen-name Marion Jay, it was published in another form by O.U.P. Music Department). He wrote a fine speech to precede Gheon's The Way of the Cross; then a playlet on witchcraft, Frontiers of Hell. He helped draft "Aims and Objects for a Co-operative Company", and advised me on preparing a production of Samson Agonistes.

His generosity was unbounded. Most of us were young and raw. He would discuss anything. He had a sharp appreciation for the opposite case to the one being argued. His agreeable mockery and scorn for silly or slipshod statements was humbling (never humiliating). His beliefs were balanced by his scepticism; the value he set on this is expressed by Thomas in Terror of Light.

There were lines from the Bible which Charles quoted with sinister hilarity; a favourite was: "with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again" ... "good measure, pressed down ... and running over!" and his own version of the Lord questioning Job: "Where wast thou when I made the Hippopotamus?"

Coming out from the Eucharist at St. Cross, he would light a cigarette, muttering "Well. Well. Well!" in evident astonishment at what had taken place. Leaving the breakfast-table one morning he turned at the door, saying to the two small daughters of Dick Milford, who were staying in the house: "Well, God bless you both. But look out for yourselves if He does!" His advice to me as a prospective writer was: "Always remember the rules of melodrama. Something must happen on every page!" I have tried to obey.

There were men and women, not many I think, who disliked or were embarrassed by Charles; but from what I saw, most people loved him. Gerry Hopkins once made a remark, the more notable coming from someone of his character, that Charles was the only saint he had ever met.

August 1977

C Ruth Spalding
1977

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

The meetings are held at the Institute of Christian Studies, 84 Margaret Street, London, W.1., on Saturdays at 2.30 p.m. Each meeting is followed by discussion and tea. The Institute is five minutes' walk from Oxford Circus underground station, up Upper Regent Street, second turning on the right, and on the right hand side near the far end.

- 15th October, 1977: Subject: "The Doctrine of Exchange, Substitution and Coinherence in Charles Williams' Work"; Xenia Howard-Johnston.
- 11th February, 1978: Subject: "Objections to Charles Williams"; Stephen Medcalf.
- 15th April, 1978: Subject: "The Theme of Paradise in Dante": John Allitt.
- 20th May, 1978: Annual General Meeting, followed by Lord Beaumont on "Charles Williams and lay Anglican Theology in the Twentieth Century".

Weekend 23/25 June, 1978, preliminary notice of a weekend conference to be held at The Grail, Pinner. Programme to be announced.

Please bring copies of any books likely to be referred to at a meeting. There is no fee for members (except at the weekend conference), but 50p must be paid for a guest (members can bring one guest each) and this should be handed to the person in charge of the meeting.

MEETING OF THE S.W. LONDON GROUP

The next meeting will be held on the 13th October at 7 p.m. for 7.30 at 32 Arterberry Road, Wimbledon, London, S.W.20 (01-946 1428). Miss A. L. Phillips will introduce a discussion of War in Heaven and The Place of the Lion.

LONDON READING GROUP

2nd October, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at Charles and Alice Mary Hadfield's house, The White Cottage, 21 Randolph Road, London, W.9. (nearest station, Warwick Avenue), continuing Taliessin through Logres. Please bring sandwiches.

29th October, Saturday, at 7.30 p.m. at David and Dulcie Caro's house, 50 Drayton Gardens, London, S.W.10 (nearest station, Gloucester Road), continuing The Figure of Beatrice, with Dante's Purgatorio.

8th January, 1978, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at David and Dulcie Caro's house (see above).

4th March, 1978, Saturday, at 7.30 p.m. at Richard and Joan Wallis's flat, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London, W.11 (nearest station, Notting Hill Gate).

9th April, 1978, Sunday, at 1 p.m. at Charles and Alice Mary Hadfield's house (see above).

C.W. SOCIETY NEWS

Officers

The Council has elected the following officers for the year beginning July 1977:

Chairman:	Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London, W11 3BS (221 0057)
Secretary:	Dr. Brian Home, King's College Hostel, Vincent Square, London, S.W.1. (834 4740)
Treasurer:	Philip Bovey, 32 Maple Street, London, W.1. (637 0449)
Newsletter Editor:	Miss Xenia Howard-Johnston, 13 Princess Road, London, N.W.1. (722 1595)
Membership Secretaries:	Jenet and Philip Bovey, 32 Maple Street, London, W.1. (637 0449)
Lending Library:	Mrs. Anne Scott, 25 Corfton Road, London, W5 2HP. (997 2667)

New Members (September 1977)

Mrs. Lindsay Correa, 13 Powderham Crescent, Exeter, Devon.

Miss Lynette F. Johnson, 1754 Seventh Street, Riverside, California
92507, U.S.A.

Miss Gillian Lunn, 26 Village Road, Finchley, London, N.3.

Miss Ruth Spalding, 34 Reynards Road, Welwyn, Hertfordshire, AL6 9TP.

Dr. and Mrs. Erik Routley, Route 518, R.D.I., Skillman, N.J., 08558, U.S.A.

Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Skottowe, 5 Netherbury Road, Ealing, London, W.5.

Mr. and Mrs. Woody Wendling, 834 65th Ave. 2nd. Floor, Philadelphia,
Pa. 19126, U.S.A.

Death of C.W's sister

We are sorry to report the death of Charles Williams' sister, Edith, in July. She was delighted at the founding of our Society and became a life member. She was always helpful with information about her and Charles' family, background and youth. All her long life she was a devoted member of the congregation of St. Alban's Abbey. Two members of our Society knew her well and saw much of her when she became less mobile, John Pellow and Brenda Rushton. They were at her funeral, to which the Society sent flowers. Her grave is in the Abbey churchyard.

We also regret to report the death of Lynton Lamb, colleague of C.W. at the Oxford University Press, and the artist of the endpaper of Taliessin Through Logres.

Taliessin Endpaper

With the kind permission of the late Lynton Lamb, the artist, and of the Oxford University Press, the Society has reprinted the endpaper which was used in early editions of Taliessin Through Logres. This drawing, made at C.W's express directions, shows the female body superimposed upon a sketch map of Europe and part of Asia, to form a visual experience of the poem "The Vision of the Empire" in particular, and the poems generally.

The reprint, kindly arranged for us by our member Vivian Ridler, is in black, with a margin and explanatory sentences. These can be trimmed away to the size necessary to paste the endpaper into later editions of Taliessin Through Logres. Price, 50p post free or two ordered together for 85p for members at home and in Europe. Orders to: Dr. Brian Horne, King's College Hostel, Vincent Square, London, S.W.1. United States and Canadian members can order copies from our kind member, Joyce Hines, 655 East 14 Street 4E, New York, N.Y. 10009, U.S.A., at \$ 1.25.

Society Meeting on the 10th September

On the 10th September the Society organised its first expedition, which was in the nature of a pilgrimage. We went to St. Albans, the country town north of London, where C.W. lived from 1894, aged eight, until his marriage in 1917 when he returned to London. Here he was educated, grew up, was confirmed and married.

Thirty of us (on a beautiful fine day) made the half-hour's journey to St. Albans, which is built beside the Roman site of Verulamium, now a recreation area. We walked past 36 Victoria Street, the little house-and-shop where Charles and Edith lived, and where his mother and almost blind father sold artists' materials. We gathered at the Abbey, and were taken on an outline tour of the huge mediaeval building founded in 793, round the site where the first English martyr St. Alban died in about 303 A.D. Here Charles worshipped every week, was confirmed and married.

We then moved to the Abbey Gateway, a mediaeval building which had held the Abbey Day School, where C.W. was educated. It has now spread into a modern school, but the Gateway still stands. Here the headmaster had spared a Saturday morning to be present, and welcomed us with coffee. He had taken much trouble to set out an exhibition of items of C.W.'s time, group photos, school magazines, reports; two items included C.W.'s name. School treasures, e.g. a book given by Sir Francis Bacon (Viscount St. Albans 1561-1628), were laid out for us to see. We climbed the central stone spiral stairway that C.W. must have run up and down, and saw the ancient ceilings, doors and windows which were his ordinary school surroundings.

Then we went to the Town Hall where we ate our packed lunches and drank wine provided by our chairman. So fortified we moved to a committee room and held our meeting. John Pellow spoke of his long friendship with C.W. from 1920, the only record we have from one who knew him and Mrs. Williams in domestic life, unconnected with the office. John was the first reviewer to take serious notice of C.W.'s verse in Divorce. Parts of his talk are included in this Newsletter. We read The Death of Good Fortune round the whole gathering, and various readers read selections of the early poetry related to C.W.'s St. Albans period and its surroundings, until the meeting closed at 4.00.

Proposed American Section of Newsletter

The Council of the Charles Williams Society has been concerned for some time about our American members, who cannot share the benefits of our English, Scottish and European members in meetings - organised or personal - and the use of library and reference facilities. All that they get for their subscription is the Newsletter.

We have enquired of certain American members whether they would like to run an American Newsletter, circulating with ours. Dorothy Hobson Fitzgerald of 328 West 19th St., New York, N.Y. 10011, and Dr. Stephen Matthews, of 103 Windsor Avenue, Rockville Centre, New York, N.Y. 11570, advise us that this idea would be premature, as American membership is not yet large and is widely scattered. They suggest instead an American section of our Newsletter.

All American members are therefore invited to send in material about Charles Williams, poems, essays, reviews, questions, whatever they wish, to Dorothy Fitzgerald, who has agreed to act as American Editor. Material selected will be sent by her to England for inclusion in the American Section of the current Newsletter, subject, of course, to the final decision of the Editor, Xenia Howard-Johnston.

We are enormously grateful to Dorothy Fitzgerald for this offer and for her thought about her proposition; also to Dr. Matthews (Society Bibliographical Consultant) for his share in the consideration. Now it's up to you - our American members. We want to hear from you, about the Society, about what you have written or thought on Charles Williams. Questions too, that we can answer! First step - write your interest in to Dorothy Fitzgerald, address above; second, get your script ready and send it in to her. Our English members will be as much interested in reading the American Section as you will yourselves.