

The Charles Williams Society

CHARLES WILLIAMS CENTENARY YEAR

NEWSLETTER

No. 42, SUMMER 1986

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

12 July 1986: Unveiling of plaque to CW on the house of his birth - 3 Caedmon Road, London N7 at 12 noon (nearest Underground Station is Holloway Road on the Piccadilly Line). An exhibition of Charles Williams' life and works will be on display at Islington Central Library, 2 Fieldway Crescent, London N5 from 30 June until 12 July.

20 September 1986 (CW's birthday): There will be a service of thanksgiving for the life and work of Charles Williams at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford at 12 noon. An exhibition of CW's life and works will be on display in the Divinity Schools in Oxford from 8 September until 18 October.

22 November 1986: Elizabeth Brewer will speak on 'The Role of Women in Charles Williams' poems', at 2.30pm in the Society's usual meeting place, Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W1.

LONDON READING GROUP

10 August 1986, Sunday: We will meet in St John's Parish Room, 2 Lansdowne Crescent, Ladbroke Grove, Notting Hill Gate, London W11, at 1pm. We have finished reading the Taliessin poems and will follow on by reading "The Figure of Arthur" in Arthurian Torso. Please bring sandwiches - coffee and tea provided.

OXFORD READING GROUP

For details please contact either Anne Scott (Oxford 53897) or Brenda Boughton (55589).

CAMBRIDGE READING GROUP

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

LAKE MICHIGAN AREA READING GROUP

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

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Society's Annual General Meeting was held on Saturday 26 April 1986 at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W1.

Reports on activities during the past year were given by the Chairman, the Secretary (presented by the Chairman in Mrs Lunn's absence), the Treasurer and the Newsletter Editor. The same Committee were re-elected except that Peter Couchman joins the Committee in place of Martin Moynihan who resigned. Points of general interest made in the reports were that the Society has now formally been registered as a Charity by the Charity Commissioners; following a notice of appeal for funds for roof-repair of Holy Cross Church, Oxford where C.W. is buried, the Committee sent £25 and referred to the appeal in the Newsletter - the Society has been thanked; the sale of CW's books is rather static as most of the stock has been sold, some of the income from sales will go towards the Centenary expenses; planning for the Centenary events has kept the Committee busy and we have also been grateful for the help of individual Society members.

In this, our Centenary Year, we can be encouraged by widening horizons - C.W. gets mentioned in new books and articles (and we discover older ones) and we hear of translations of his work - the Arthurian poetry into German, All Hallow's Eve into Italian, and a new member hopes to translate one or more novels into Russian. Earlier this year, our Librarian, Brian Horne, gave a series of talks in a course on The Inklings, 5 on C.W. and 3 on J.R.R. Tolkien. In November he will be lecturing at a symposium on C.W. in Duisburg, Germany.

CENTENARY YEAR 1986

We hope that members, particularly those in London, will come to the unveiling of the plaque at 3 Caedmon Road, Holloway, London N7 at 12 noon on Saturday 12 July and will also visit the exhibition in Islington Central Library between 1 - 12 July (the library is open until 8pm Monday to Friday and until 5pm on Saturdays). A second plaque has been purchased for the site of 36 Victoria Street, St Albans and the developers of the site expect to have it in position during the Centenary Year, probably in November /December.

Members are also reminded of the Service of Thanksgiving to be held at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, at 12 noon on Saturday, 20 September 1986 and the opportunity of visiting an exhibition of CW's life and works arranged by the Bodleian in conjunction with our Oxford members at the Divinity Schools from 8 September.

Copies of the selection of Charles Williams' poems made by Anne Ridler to mark the Centenary of his birth and printed for the Society by Vivian Ridler at the Perpetua Press, Oxford, are available from the Society's Chairman, Richard Wallis, 6 Matlock Court, Kensington Park Road, London W11 6BS at a price of £5 plus 25p for UK postage or £1 for overseas postage. Copies will also be on sale at most of the above events. Every copy purchased makes a contribution towards the Centenary Funds so members who have not donated separately are encouraged to buy one!

CENTENARY CELEBRATION AT ST ALBANS

On Saturday 24 May, at noon, a Commemorative Festival Eucharist was celebrated at the High Altar of St Albans Abbey - the first event to mark the Centenary this year of the birth of Charles Williams. The celebrant was the Dean of St Albans, the preacher was the Bishop of London. Mozart's Missa Brevis in D and the motet 'O Sacrum Convivium' by Croce were sung by a choir from Kings College, London. It was a most splendid and thrilling occasion and it was good to have a number of St Albans townsfolk with us and to welcome from our American members Mr and Mrs Lyle Dorsett and Mr Allan Hargis from Wheaton College and Professor and Mrs Huttar from Hope College, Michigan. The exhibition of CW's life and work had been on show in St Albans Central Library for the previous week and members who had reached the town in the morning had been able to visit it.

After the service a reception, with a light lunch, was held in the Abbey Chapter House Refectory and our Chairman presented the Bishop of London with a copy of the selection of CW's poems made by Anne Ridler to mark the centenary of his birth; copies of this were also available for sale. Following the reception we were welcomed at St Albans School, in the Abbey Gatehouse, by the Headmaster, who had prepared an interesting selection of documents and photographs relating to the period of CW's schooldays. He gave us an entertaining talk about the school and our Chairman presented him with a copy of CW's biography of Francis Bacon for the school library; this copy had been offered by Brenda Boughton in response to our appeal in the Autumn Newsletter and had been skillfully rebound by her for the presentation.

seen to possess intellectual power and supernatural awareness, which are expressed in his works as a poet, dramatist, literary critic, novelist and theologian. In none of these spheres of activity have I professional competence nor did I know him personally, and I told Fr. Horne that were I to preach, I could do no more than speak of the extraordinary and mysterious impact which he had and still has upon me, and bid you to praise God with me for it. He expressed himself content with what I said so I accepted the invitation. I suspect that most, if not all of you who are here today have, in some measure, shared my experience and I hope that I shall therefore speak of what we have in common, whatever professional interest you may have as well.

Those who hear me preach with some frequency will know that I have been much influenced by the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and of T S Eliot, but such influence has been of a different kind from that of Charles Williams. In their case, their use of poetic imagery has given precision and depth to what is expressed in the dogmas of the Church - distilling and articulating their inner meaning. For this reason, I frequently quote them when I am attempting to expand those dogmas.

With Charles Williams, it is not so much the meaning of the dogmas which he conveys, though of course that he does. The revelation of meaning is overwhelmed by an awareness of the supernatural realities of which the dogmas speak. Propositions which were accepted intellectually, under his influence become alive. One is conscious of living in a world which is not in a Platonic sense simply a pale and imperfect reflection of the archetypal images existing in glorious isolation in the heavenly realm, but a world in which the natural and supernatural are gloriously and alarmingly at play with each other. Supremely he brings an awareness that the God of Christians is not an Absolute of metaphysical abstraction, who condescended to enter into a relationship with the world He had created, but a dynamic relationship of mutual love, of three Persons united in one substance - Love which overflowed and overflows into creation, drawing from it all manner of response.

The impact he made is well demonstrated in the reaction of C S Lewis on hearing of the death of Charles Williams. To Sr. Penelope he wrote: 'Death has done nothing to my idea of him but he has done - oh, I can't say what to my idea of death. It has made the next world much more real and palpable'. To Michael Williams he wrote: 'My friendship is not ended. His death has had the very unexpected effect of making death itself look quite different: I believe in the next life ten times more strongly than I did. At moments it seems quite tangible. Mr Dyson, on the day of the funeral, summed up what many of us felt. "It is not blasphemous," he said, "to believe that what was true of Our Lord is, in its less degree, true of all who are in Him. They go away in order to be with us in a new way, even closer than before."'

At the same time this burning illumination brought a disturbing awareness of the power of the supernatural. The point I am trying to make is made superbly in The Place of the Lion. The approach of Damaris Tighe to the archetypal images is purely academic and intellectual. When they are drawn into the world, they threaten to destroy it. On the one hand, they are not purely intellectual concepts. On the other hand, they must be disciplined, and related to the Divine Reality in which they have their origin, if they are to be controlled. So Anthony Durrant restores order, as the vice-regent

of God, by naming the beasts.

Such awareness can produce a variety of responses. It can, particularly when it is first perceived, because of the awareness of power and its dangers, lead to a cautious, moralising approach to religion or one tamed by a desire not to offend contemporary secular thought. It reminds us of the question so beloved of interviewers on the television when they are apparently seeking to minimise the impact of a point the person they are interviewing has made. They say 'But is there not a danger that?' and how they love to say it! I do not think Charles Williams ever appeared on the television but if he had I can imagine him saying 'of course there is a danger - there's always danger with God'. Both responses are ultimately sterile, for they lack joy. The awareness of power can, on the other hand, lead to a willingness to try all ways of experiencing and participating in supernatural power. I hope I will not offend you - it may indeed help some of you to whom Charles Williams' involvement in the occult in the years before the war causes unease, even distress - if I say that such was, I believe, his approach at one time. He was aware, to use the words of another remarkable man, Roger Lloyd, who was influenced by and admired Charles Williams, that Our Lord implied "two dangerous truths. (Everything he said was 'dangerous' and that was not the least of reasons for his crucifixion.) He was saying, in effect, that evil and good have a certain kinship in that both are spiritual phenomena The Danger of it is the heresy which crops up again and again of supposing that because good and evil are akin in their methods of conquest and the condition of their growth, therefore they are two different aspects of the same reality and so are all too easily taken to be interchangeable terms. To have the knowledge of good and evil is the mark of the saint but that saint's disciples frequently suppose that they stand above good and evil." Charles Williams, while retaining this awareness of what good and evil have in common as Spiritual reality, certainly came to recognize their differences.

In the Preface to his book on Witchcraft he described it as 'a brief account of the history in Christian times of that perverted way of the soul which we call magic (or at a lower level) witchcraft and with this the reaction against it.' At the end of the book he describes it as the way of the Perversion of Images. As Mrs Hadfield says in her recent book: "To him, evil was as ordinary and as real as people and, by its ordinariness and reality, the more to be utterly excluded." But this recognition of the power of evil represented a truth which many Christians need to hear today - namely, that religion, which means loving, demands that we take risks - not seeking to confine truth to that which we can comprehend or behaviour which is going to make the least demands upon us.

John Heath-Stubbs has pointed out that though both T S Eliot and Charles Williams arrived at orthodox Christian faith in the Catholic tradition of the Church of England, they arrived from different directions. Eliot's starting point was the Puritan tradition of New England, whereas Charles Williams returned from the fantasies of occultism. My debt to him in this respect lies in the daring aspect of his character - to his willingness to take risks - his recognition that there is theological truth in the saying of Samuel Butler, which I suppose we all debated at school and is often misquoted: "that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have lost at all."

I suppose that for many Charles Williams' name will be associated with the Way of Affirmation which he so boldly followed by way of the poet and the lover and in the image of the City, rather than the image of Nature. For me, as one brought up in a puritan and virtually non-sacramental tradition, Charles Williams opened the windows to allow the light to reveal the glorious richness of the Christian life. Yet on it I would make but two comments. First, and this also relates to what I said about his daring, in his insistence on that Way, he did not advocate an uncontrolled roaming over the plain of human experience. The discipline of the Way of Negation was an integral element in his thought, which permitted the fullest use of the Affirmative Way. "Neither is this Thou" was not an end in itself but the necessary utterance, if we are able to say: "This also is Thou".

Secondly, there is a particularity about his advocacy of it, which accords with the manner of our redemption by God. To quote John Heath-Stubbs again: "Charles Williams' thought is Christian not Platonist. The aim of the Way is not the exaltation of Eros to a transcendent plane, but its transformation into Agape ... Williams is bound by his belief in the Incarnation, which implies an affirmation of the importance of the particular, and of material experience." This particularity is evident in his use of the phrases 'The Divine Thing', 'The Holy Thing' and of the Divine intention and desire as the Will. It is reflected in his increasing affirmation of the sacramental life in which the way of Affirmation is used in reverse as it were, that is, used by God, rather than by Man, when the images are by the Divine Promise and Power made the vehicle of the Divine Energy, which then redeems and disciplines our response.

I began by speaking of the way in which Charles Williams makes us aware of the supernatural realities of which the dogmas of the Church speak. For that alone, our hearts should be full of gratitude. Yet it is not unmixed with degrees of apprehension for we see our lives, not just in many dimensions of reality, but in the light of the One Eternal Dimension of God Himself. The realities are not merely objective, fascinating and absorbing. They call us to make decisions. We can experience them at our pleasure and ignore or discard them when we wish. But we cannot be relieved of the cost of doing so. They all direct us to the choices which we have to make which determine our eternal relationship to God - decisions which spring from our response to Him in this world and from our response to our fellow creatures and to creation itself.

I have not mentioned one of the most characteristic elements in Charles Williams' thought: the Doctrine of substitution and the Way of Exchange. All I would say about this is that it flows from the doctrines to which I have referred. It cannot be proclaimed as a doctrine in itself. It springs from the understanding of Reality, surpremely of the Eternal Reality of God Himself as Love, and from the awareness of supernatural power. Our participation in both enables us to obey in a precise way the commands of St Paul to bare one another's burdens and fill up the sufferings of Christ.

Although Charles Williams' portrayal of spiritual power and of the possibility of its perversion is compelling and disturbs, there is underlying all his thoughts the insistence that it springs from Love which waters cannot quench - the life of perfect mutual Love which is God

Himself, the Blessed Trinity, the Father eternally giving of Himself to the Son, in his paternity, the Son eternally reflecting back to the Father his Love, in his Sonship, and that mutual Love being of such transcendent glory and perfection that of it we can use only the highest description at our command and speak of the Persons of the Holy Spirit. It is this vision which calls us to unimaginable Joy. It is perhaps above all for that vision of magnificence for which we praise God today for creating Charles Williams, and pray that with him we may share in the Transcendent Glory of God now and in inexhaustible richness in eternity."

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