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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth  
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

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## **Charles Williams: Prophet of Glory**

Susan Wendling

## Charles Williams: Prophet of Glory

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*“All else is Love’s—this only must be given—  
a gate, a place, an opening meet for heaven.”  
The Rite of the Passion*

Ever since the last Frances Ewbank Colloquium back in March of '04, which was so wonderfully packed with papers and presentations on C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald, Dorothy L. Sayers, G.K. Chesterton, and J.R.R. Tolkien, I have been wondering at the fact that there were no presentations on the life or writings of “the third Inkling,” Charles Williams. At the close of the conference I mentioned this to Dave Neuhouser and he immediately suggested that I “do something,” for the next conference in 2006! When I returned back to Philadelphia, with my head and heart full of “C.S. Lewis and Friends,” I stumbled upon this description of these people in another book, written by a former Rector of our church:

Such men are the prophets we need right now, and they will rarely be recognized because they are too radical for the radical; their hopes for a perfect home embarrass the utopian; their certitude is too brave for the guerilla; and their vision of humanity astonishes the humanitarian. They will write poetry in banks and fairy tales in the corners of pubs. Sometimes they will puff pipes and, like T.S. Eliot, call themselves classicists or monarchists or even Anglo-Catholics, bemused at the rage of their cultured despisers who claimed not to be listening. In the end they will not be brightly martyred but, dressed in sack suits and cassocks, will slowly be tightened out of the human parliament for the crime of pronouncing glory instead of mere good.<sup>1</sup>

Today I fight against the idea of the prophet/poet Charles Williams (or “CW” as he is commonly referred to) being “slowly tightened” out of our consideration, for whatever reason, for those who know about him and still read him know that he did indeed “pronounce glory

instead of mere good.” He deserves to be remembered and read!

Since Tom Howard has recently written that “Williams’s name is strictly a name for insiders,”<sup>2</sup> let me just give a barebones outline of his life for those here who don’t know him well. Born in 1886 to a poor family in north London, Charles and his family moved to St. Albans in 1894, a cathedral town where the family opened an art supply shop and where Charles was educated. Because of his father’s loss of eyesight and the family’s financial struggles (Charles did have a younger sister, Edith, for the family to care for), Charles was unable to finish his education at University College, London. A job was found in a Methodist Book Room, and later on, in June, 1908, at the Oxford University Press, where he worked as an editor until his death in May of 1945. He did eventually marry Florence Conway in 1917, a young woman he had met at St. Albans, and they had a son, Michael, who was born in 1922.

In 1939, at the outbreak of WWII, the OUP evacuated its offices from London up to Oxford, and CW, now 53, moved with the Press. His life entered a new phase at this point, as he met Lewis and was immediately drawn into his circle. Lewis and CW talked much about the poet John Milton, and Humphrey Carpenter, in *The Inklings*, quotes Lewis as determined “to smuggle him into the Oxford lecture list, so that we might have some advantage from the great man’s accidental presence in Oxford.”<sup>3</sup> So, in spite of CW’s lack of a university degree, on January 29, 1940, he began a series of lectures on Milton at the University’s Divinity School. The second lecture, the following week, was on Milton’s poem, “Comus.” Here is Lewis’s description:

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Simply as criticism it was superb because here was a man who really cared with every fibre of his being about “the sage and serious doctrine of virginity” which it would never occur to the ordinary modern critic to take seriously. But it was more important still as a sermon. It was a beautiful sight to see a whole roomful of modern young men and women sitting in that absolute silence which can *not* be faked, very puzzled but spell-bound . . . That beautiful carved room had probably not witnessed anything so important since some of the great mediaeval or Reformation lectures. I have at last, if only for once, seen a university doing what it was founded to do: teaching wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

At last, with the support of his friends Lewis and Tolkien, Williams was moving in a society of intellectual equals. His academic lecturing load built up until on February 18, 1943, the honorary degree of Master of Arts was conferred on him. In addition, his study on Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice*, was also published in 1943. Hadfield describes this as “a full-length working out of the theology of romantic love in those Dantean terms that had been glanced at in Chapter V of *He Came Down from Heaven* and outlined in *Religion and Love in Dante*.<sup>5</sup> In a way, this was a vindication for Williams, for when he first formulated his ideas of the theology of romantic love in his *Outlines of Romantic Theology* back in 1924, the manuscript was rejected by the Oxford University Press. Humphrey Milford, the Head of the OUP and CW’s boss, wrote to him in a note: “I fear this is not for us. It may be for all time and I may be like the poor Indian, but I am afraid of it and of you.”<sup>6</sup>

On May 15, 1945, at the close of WWII, Williams died unexpectedly, shocking Lewis and all of his friends. He was 59 years old, and his gravestone simply says “Poet. Under the Mercy.” His biographers have noted that these last nine years of his life, from 1936 to 1945, were incredibly productive, with poetry, plays, novels, biographies, reviews, literary criticism and theological treatises on everything from the history of the Holy Spirit in the Church to Witchcraft! This is a tremendous literary output, and is all the more astounding since he not only worked full-time at OUP but also regularly lectured in the evening at various literary institutes around London.

With this brief outline of CW’s life in mind, let’s examine some comments about Williams, either spoken or written, by his friends. By hearing for yourselves how they reacted to him, you should be stimulated to desire to find out more about this “enigmatic Inkling” and, hopefully, even seek out his writings. After presenting these testimonials from various friends, I will outline certain key ideas that Williams wrote about in all of the varied literary genres mentioned already. Finally, I will conclude by illustrating how CW himself

actually embodied the principles he wrote about as he lived his outwardly ordinary and seemingly dull life.

According to a younger poet-friend, Anne Ridler, T.S. Eliot, whom CW had met and become friends with, saw Williams’s importance as being, above all, in his supernatural insight. Ridler goes on to quote from Eliot’s memorial broadcast in 1946, in which he said also: “Williams . . . seemed to me to approximate, more nearly than any man I have ever known familiarly, to the saint.”<sup>7</sup> Later Ridler says that CW exhibited a loving-kindness so remarkable “that it caused T.S. Eliot to inquire of him whether he was to be called the Blessed Charles in his lifetime.”<sup>8</sup>

C.S. Lewis, in his “Dedication to Charles Williams” at the beginning of *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, says that CW’s lecture on Milton at the Oxford Divinity School had filled his hearers with what we could call today “shock and awe,” for he did nothing less than dare to praise the ancient virtue of Chastity and extol its real spiritual power. But listen yourself to Lewis’s high praise of Williams:

. . . but it is a reasonable hope that of those who heard you in Oxford many will understand henceforward that when the old poets made some virtue their theme they were not teaching but adoring, and that what we take for the didactic is often the enchanted. It gives me a sense of security to remember that, far from loving your work because you were my friend, I first sought your friendship because I loved your books . . .<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Lewis is saying that Williams, when he lectured on the old poets, made his hearers learn about adoration and enchantment. Further, at the close of his Dedication, Lewis says that CW has, after more than 100 years of laborious misunderstanding, dared “to recover a true critical tradition.”<sup>10</sup> The implication is that CW the poet has woven a new spell, enchanting his hearers by the “adoration” of old poets, and that this has somehow “undone” the old spell of misunderstanding Milton, “for over one hundred years,” rather like Sleeping Beauty after her sleep in the forest of thorns for one hundred years being “awakened” by her true Prince! Anne Ridler corroborates Lewis in her wonderful “Introduction” to *The Image of the City and Other Essays*: “Lost in his incantation, he was entirely unconscious of self, so that his hearers, too, became oblivious of the person of the speaker, and felt as though they were transported to the actual fount of the words. ‘There is a *chaunt* in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth,’ wrote Hazlitt, ‘which acts as a spell on the hearer and disarms the judgment.’”<sup>11</sup> In *Arthurian Torso*, Lewis says that CW’s poetic world “is certainly not a world I feel at home in, any more than I feel at home in the worlds of Dante and Milton. It strikes me as a perilous world full of ecstasies and

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terrors . . . There is no snugness in Williams's *Arthuriad*, just as there is none in the *Paradiso*. What quiet there is is only specious: the roses are always trembling, Broceliande astir, planets and emperors at work . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Dorothy L. Sayers read CW's work on Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice*, and was smitten with Dante—so much so that she devoured *The Divine Comedy*, teaching herself Italian and writing lengthy and incredible letters to Williams. He inspired her to undertake translating the *Comedy* into English, and when he died suddenly from an abdominal operation, she responded thus:

This is very grievous news. Charles Williams was unique in his work and his personality; there is nobody who can take his place. It comes as a great blow to me personally. I was very fond of him and proud of his friendship; and especially at this moment, the work I am trying to do owed so much to him and to his encouragement and inspiration that I feel as though the whole direction of it had been cut off.<sup>13</sup>

And in another letter six days later:

Charles was a darling—a saint without being a prig or an embarrassment, which is so rare; the sort of person who makes the idea of going to Heaven attractive—one so often feels one would dislike the rest of the population.<sup>14</sup>

Later, in 1954, nine years after his death, Sayers assessed him thus:

Charles Williams was, as we both know, a major prophet. He could both love and know, and he knew good and evil as no one else knew them. I am sure that in spite of the form of his "spiritual thrillers"—disgusting phrase—he did not think of the spiritual as being wholly from outside. He knew it as both immanent and transcendent—and indeed he knew better than anyone the peril of the immanentist: the outward projection of the self and the failure to acknowledge a "true other." And he knew the peril of the intellectual better than anybody. . . . If Charles had a weakness, it was perhaps a temptation to see himself too readily as Taliessin and Peter Stanhope. He was prompted, I am sure, by his generous love for people; but he did not quite escape permitting a cult of himself. But I hate finding weaknesses in Charles, who showed me so much.<sup>15</sup>

In 1955, she writes to a Professor Foligno, saying that it was Charles Williams who first stimulated her to read Dante, and how much she was on her own to understand him:

I had to sort it all out for myself. There was only Charles Williams, and he wasn't a textual scholar, but a poet and the interpreter of a way of life: and he died before the war was over . . .<sup>16</sup>

Then, in 1957, she wrote:

I have always found him illuminating, even when he is most perverse and most alien to me. . . . but I can enter into Charles's type of mind, to some extent, by imagination, and look through its windows, as it were, into places where I cannot myself walk. He was, up to a certain point I think, a practicing mystic. . . . But he is a writer who, if he does not command allegiance, tends to arouse the most violent antipathies . . .<sup>17</sup>

What are we to make of these summations of the various friends of Charles Williams: "saintly," "blessed," "enchanted," "a major prophet," "alien," "a practicing mystic," "unique," and finally, the "interpreter of a way of life?" Just what is going on here? When Dorothy L. Sayers wrote that he was "a major prophet," she went on to say that "he could both know and love." This opens up a clue to us, I think, because the ancient poets and philosophers always connected up knowledge with love. In order to be granted wisdom and knowledge, the seeker after Truth would first have to love God and humbly submit to God's revelation. Only then would knowledge be revealed. This pathway to knowledge being linked to purity of life and love of God is also seen in the ancient practices of alchemy and magic, with this actually being considered an essential preliminary condition of discovery. This mode of thought and approach to knowledge, both philosophical and scientific, also shaped the Rosicrucianism of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> Before giving more details on how Williams overlapped his knowledge of esoteric magical practices and his mystical Anglo-Catholic beliefs, let me expand more fully on Williams's central and life-long exploration of what has been called "the theology of romantic love."

This "romantic theology," this Dantean "way of Love," as mentioned earlier in this paper, entails three primarily theological concepts: co-inherence, exchange and substitution. These underlie Williams's poetic, romantic and theological thought. His biographer, Alice Mary Hadfield succinctly defines each as follows:

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*Co-inherence:* Christ gave his life for us, and his risen life is in each one if we will to accept it. Simply as men and women, without being self-conscious or portentous, we can share in this life within the divine co-inherence of the Trinity, and in so doing live as members one of another. In our degrees of power, intelligence, love or suffering, we are not divided from God or each other, for Christ's nature is not divided.

*Exchange:* The whole natural and social life of the world works as a process of living by and with each other, for good or bad. We cannot be born without physical exchange, nor can we live without it. But we can each day choose or grudge it, in personal contacts, in neighborhood, and in our society under the law. To practice this approach to co-inherence we can find strength in the risen power of Christ linking all men.

*Substitution:* Another way of approach to co-inherence is by compact to bear another's burden. One can take by love the worry of another, or hold a terror, as one member of Christ's life helping, through that life, another member in trouble.<sup>19</sup>

The Way of Affirmation and the Way of Negation as two paths to heavenly wisdom are also critical to understanding CW's thought. As a poet working in images, CW is primarily a follower of the Way of Affirmation of images; yet he acknowledges the Way of Negation as the way promulgated by the ancient church with its emphasis on asceticism and the denial of self-indulgence. CW's Dante study, *The Figure of Beatrice*, brings all these themes together: "the way of affirmation of images as man's way in to God, the way of romantic love as a particular mode of the same, and the involution of this love with images of the community or City, with poetry and human learning."<sup>20</sup> Yet Williams, always balancing out the paradoxes of life and thought, felt how intermingled these two Ways were, and how the danger of idolatry always lurked behind the adoration of an image as the reality it signified. Beatrice was a God-bearing image to Dante, but she was not God. Over and over in his writings CW states this in a wonderful maxim: "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou." In "Seed of Adam," Williams refers to it as "the maxim that rules the schools of prophets."<sup>21</sup> Gaven Ashenden agrees and says that by "integrating" the two spiritualities of the Negative Way and the Positive Way, the mature Williams was able to develop what Ashenden actually calls "his prophetic notion of co-inherence" [my emphasis].<sup>22</sup> It is truly prophetic because it enabled Williams to "overcome the unhealthy division between Spirit and Matter that in

various ways has afflicted Christianity since its founding."<sup>23</sup>

Now that you have the basic outline of CW's life in mind, as well as a basic understanding of the great themes of Co-inherence and the Way of the Affirmation of images seen in his developed "theology of romantic love," let me finish by describing in more detail how Williams himself, in his own life, embodied these ideas. His biographer describes how the idea of co-inherence itself came to him early with the death of his friends, Eyers and Nottingham, in WWI, with feeling their bodies return, marching in sudden strangers' footsteps, while

To walls and window-curtains cling  
Your voices at each breakfasting,  
As the cups pass from hand to hand,  
Crying for drink in No Man's Land.<sup>24</sup>

This poem is from his third volume of poetry, *Divorce*, and was published in 1920. The poet Charles Williams is himself embodying the life-in-death of his friends within the co-inherence of life that his very teacup at his own breakfast has become to him the soldier's tin cup over in the trenches of No Man's Land.

This deepening awareness of all the exchanges and substitutions led Williams to offer himself sacrificially to others, without any regard for whether his doing so would "get him anyplace," as we would think of it. Thus, he poured himself out for years teaching in the evening institutes which were really what we would call today "adult education classes." These classes were not official university courses in English Literature, taught to the upper crust of the English aristocracy. No, these were blue-collar, working class people just attending classes out of personal interest. Yet CW poured out his incantations of poetry and spent time with his pupils. He was so filled with loving kindness to so many kinds of people that his friends all thought him "saintly."

Another place besides the evening institute classes where CW embodied his poetic and theological ideals was at the Oxford University Press. There, CW's love for high ceremony and ritual, embodied in mythic terms, found an outlet during the 1920's. Let me further connect the relationship between CW's Anglo-Catholic mystical theology and his knowledge of ancient esoteric beliefs and practices during these years. Specifically, it is known that from the time of his marriage in 1917 until 1927, Williams attended the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, an esoteric group run by the mystical occultist, Arthur Edward Waite. It is known that CW actually memorized the words of high ritual when he was initiated, and that he thoroughly enjoyed doing so. We also know that Waite's books, particularly *The Secret Doctrine in Israel* and *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*, had a huge influence on Williams's vocabulary, his literary themes, and the occult symbols used in all of his novels. According to Anne Ridler,

reading this latter book marked the origin of Williams's Arthurian studies, which led ultimately to his major poem cycles, *Taliessin Through Logres*, and *The Region of the Summer Stars*. The 1913 book—*The Secret Doctrine in Israel*—laid out a diagram of the Sephirothic Tree upon the figure of a man, thus providing CW with the foundational idea of the body as an index to the cosmos and perhaps also CW's lifelong attempt to develop an adequate theology of marriage.<sup>25</sup> With CW's involvement in Waite's esoteric society kept in mind, then, we must take note that during these years of the 1920's, CW wrote and produced three short plays in verse celebrating the work of the Oxford University Press, two of which were actually performed by CW and his co-workers for the entertainment of the staff!

Because of time constraints, I will stop at this point and invite you all to attend my second presentation on CW, which will examine how Williams went even further to embody his mythic ideals in his founding of an Order of the Companions of the Co-Inherence in 1939. We will explore Williams's theological ideas implicit in his beloved concept of Co-Inherence, and in doing so discover in a sense that Williams the Poet and Prophet of Glory, also functioned as a "Priest," leading his friends and now us his readers deeply into a vision of sacramentalist spirituality which is, according to CW, the "Actuality of the Universe." All of the poetry, plays, novels and theological treatises themselves embody this specific mystical vision of this "knight of faith."

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> George Rutler, *Priest and Priestess* (Rosemont, PA: The Good Shepherd Press, 2003 reprint), p. 44.
- <sup>2</sup> Tom Howard, "What About Charles Williams," in *Touchstone*, December 2004, p.33.
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted in Alice Mary Hadfield, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), p. 187.
- <sup>4</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), p. 119.
- <sup>5</sup> Hadfield, pp. 206-7.
- <sup>6</sup> Cited in Hadfield, p. 45.
- <sup>7</sup> Anne Ridler, "Introduction," in *Charles Williams: "The Image of the City" and Other Essays* (London: Oxford UP, 1958), p. xxviii.
- <sup>8</sup> Ridler, p. xxx.
- <sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Dedication," in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford UP, rep. 1967), p. v.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.
- <sup>11</sup> Ridler, p. xx.
- <sup>12</sup> Cited in Stephen Medcalf, "Objections to Charles Williams," in *Charles Williams: A Celebration*,

- edited by Brian Horne (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Cromwell Press, 1995), pp. 215-216.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Vol. 3: 1944-1950: A Noble Daring*, chosen and edited by Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: Carole Green Publishing, 1998), p. 146.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Vol. 4: 1951-1957: In the Midst of Life*, chosen and edited by Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: Carole Green Publishing, 2000), p. 143.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.
- <sup>18</sup> Gaven Ashenden, "Charles Williams and the Tradition of Alchemy," in *Seven*, Vol 18, p. 54.
- <sup>19</sup> Hadfield, p. 32, bottom Note.
- <sup>20</sup> Hadfield, p. 209
- <sup>21</sup> Charles Williams, *Seed of Adam and Other Plays* (London: Oxford UP, 1948), p. 12.
- <sup>22</sup> Gaven Ashenden, p. 51.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>24</sup> Cited in Hadfield, p. 32.
- <sup>25</sup> Ridler, p. xxv.