

# Under the Mercy: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Charles Williams

In the northwest quadrant of the old city of Oxford, England, behind the University Library, and hard-pressed along the edge of Magdalen's deer park, stands the parish church of St. Cross-Holywell. The church is surrounded on all sides by a short wall, which encloses both the church and its sanctified burial ground. To the rear of the church is a much larger cemetery, unconsecrated ground, overgrown in summer with uncut grasses and tall weeds. Here, one may find the final resting place of Charles Williams. It is marked by a simple stone, whose top surface is a collecting point for pebbles and occasional notes left by admiring pilgrims. From the grave grows a rose, purportedly planted by students from Drew University many years ago. Of all that could be said as an epitaph for this man, there appears but one word, and that chosen by himself. In the center of a laurel wreath, on the monument's face, is the word "Poet." Below the wreath are the words, "Under the Mercy."

Charles Walter Stansby Williams was born on 20 September 1886, in North London,<sup>1</sup> and died on 15 May 1945 in the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford.<sup>2</sup> On one level, his life's work can be quantified in his literary output: seven books of poetry, with individual poems appearing in many periodicals; ten plays; seven novels; five books of criticism; three books of theology, and several pamphlets on theological themes; and nine books of biography and history. He edited, with notes and/or critical introductions, more than a dozen books of various kinds for the Oxford University Press. From 1923 until his death, he reviewed many contemporary novels and detective stories for literary periodicals like *Time and Tide*. He led a remarkably productive publishing life, in a variety of genres.<sup>3</sup>

On a deeper level, however, Charles Williams was a complex personality, molded by accidents of circumstance as well as the routines of daily life. In this brief introduction, the outlines of Williams's life will be sketched, with commentary from some who knew him well, to help complete the portrait of this extraordinary figure.

## 1. *Early Life*

Charles Williams was both wanted and loved by his parents. His father Walter was a surviving twin, whose birth cost his mother's life. Walter was raised by a grandmother and saw the wretchedness of his father's second marriage. He longed for a stable family life of his own, which he found in his marriage in 1884 to the former Mary Wall. The births of Charles, in 1886, and Edith, in 1889, completed the family circle.

Walter was a foreign correspondence clerk in the French and German languages for an importing firm. As his eyesight began to deteriorate, Walter sought to retain his job, and wrote plays, poems, and short stories, with which he tried to supplement the family's income. Walter's publications were a source of great pride to Mary. Both parents gave Charles a rich background of reading and conversation during his formative years (A. Hadfield 3-4; Ridler xi).

Until Charles was almost eight years old, and Edith five, the family lived comfortably in North London. A downturn in business and a coincident worsening of Walter's eyesight led the family to relocate in March, 1894, to St. Alban's, a small town about twenty miles north of London. In the 1890s, St. Alban's was still sufficiently rural to fit the doctor's orders that Walter should get away from the bad air (or pollution, as we would say now) of London. Walter and Mary went into business with Mary's brother Charles Wall, selling stationery and artists' supplies at a shop called "The Art Depot." The family lived above the shop at Number 15 (now 36) Victoria Street. St. Alban's was Charles's home until his marriage; his father died there in January, 1929, at the age of seventy-nine or eighty, and his mother, in 1948, at age ninety-two (Ridler xi-xii, A. Hadfield 3-4, 22).

Charles was nurtured within the Church of England. He was baptised in the Anglican Church of St. Anne's, Finsbury Park, on 7 November 1886. The Abbey Church at St. Alban's became the center of religious life for most of Charles's childhood. He grew to love the drama of worship and was an enthusiastic, though tone-deaf, chanter of Psalms. He was confirmed in St. Alban's Abbey on 27 March 1901 (A. Hadfield 9-11).

Charles was educated in the Abbey School, and later the Grammar School, at St. Alban's; his sister Edith was taught at home. Charles was "a robust, curly-haired boy, with blue eyes, a good forehead, and much determination" (A. Hadfield 7). He proved to be an avid reader, although plagued by poor eyesight, and had a prodigious memory. Walter guided his reading, making sure he was well-versed in as wide a range of subjects as possible. Charles was drawn to historical-romantic works. He acted in historical pageants at school, and he and Edith sometimes presented plays written for them by their father. Because of his own poor eyesight, Charles did not enjoy games. When the shop was closed on Thursday afternoons, Charles would go for long walks with his father, talking the whole time. This habit of "peripatetic talking" would persist for the rest of Charles's life (Ridler xii-xiii; A. Hadfield 8).

A friend of his childhood, George Robinson, recalled that in this early period of his life, Charles was intrigued with fantasy. Charles, Edith, and Robinson carried on an extended running drama about a Prince Rudolph, Princess Rosalind, and Baron de Bracey. Anne Ridler, a friend of Charles's later years, reports: "This habit [i.e. fantasy

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making] remained with him [throughout his adult life], and many of his letters contain richly worded myths and rituals in which he imagined friends taking part and to which they too contributed according to their power" (xiv).

In 1901, Charles Williams and George Robinson won Intermediate Scholarships to University College, London. They matriculated in Arts Courses in January of 1903. The course lasted three years, but Charles's family could not afford to keep him there beyond the 1903-1904 session. He left college without a degree in 1904, having studied French, Latin, mathematics, history, and literature (Ridler xiv-xv; A. Hadfield 11-12).

A relative found Charles employment at the Methodist "New Connexion Publishing House and Book Room" in London after he left college in 1904. Charles worked there as a clerk until the Book Room closed in 1908. Through a men's discussion group, Charles met Frederick Page, who in 1908 recommended Charles for an opening on the proof-reading staff of his own employer, the Oxford University Press. Williams would remain with the Press for the rest of his life (Carpenter 82-83; Ridler xv; A. Hadfield 12-13).

## 2. *The Oxford University Press, London, 1908 to 1939*

Charles Williams was almost twenty-three when he entered the Paper, Printing, and Proof-Reading Department of the Oxford University Press. In his early years, the Press was located at Amen Corner, a short walk from the Thames and St. Paul's Cathedral. The bustle of London was all around him. Charles commuted every day from St. Alban's, varying his routine of office and home by attending night classes at the Working Men's College in London. Through his part-time classes, Charles made friends and engaged in lively discussions, often changing positions halfway through an argument, to see what sort of case he could make for the other side. He was encountering new ideas all the time, and writing poetry (Carpenter, *Inklings* 83-84; A. Hadfield 14).

In the same year he entered the Oxford University Press, he fell in love with Florence Conway, a young woman he met at a children's Christmas party in St. Alban's. Florence was a teacher, the youngest of five daughters of the manager of Hallam's ironmongery shop in St. Alban's, James Conway. She was active in amateur theatrical pageants; the photograph of Florence which appears in biographies of Williams shows her in pageant dress, about 1907. Florence's most memorable comment about her first meeting with Charles was that for the first five minutes, she thought she had never met a young man who talked so little, and for the rest of the evening, she had never met a young man who talked so much (Carpenter, *Inklings* 84; A. Hadfield 15-16; Ridler xvii). Florence wrote, many years afterward, about a meeting with Charles that took place perhaps a month later:

One January night, in the kind of weather usually associated with Good King Wenceslas, I had been to a lecture. On my homeward way . . . Charles overtook me. He put a parcel into my hands, saying he had written a sonnet sequence called *The Silver Stair*. Its theme was Renunciation. Would I read it and tell him my opinion? And he fled. I thought, "Oh, dear! Is he going to enter a monastery?" and wondered about visiting days at such places.

I read *The Silver Stair* by flickering candle-light in my cold attic room. There were eighty-two sonnets and I read them all. So lovely they seemed; I read them again and yet again. Comprehension dawned and I cried aloud "Why, I believe they are about me!" I read them again to make quite sure.

Next day I wrote my first letter to Charles. It seemed to please him, and though *The Silver Stair* had Renunciation for its theme our walks continued. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Florence became "Michal" early in their acquaintance, after the daughter of Saul who mocked David as he danced before the Lord (in II Samuel 6:16-23). She apparently was distressed by Charles's habit of publicly chanting verse aloud in a most unpleasant Cockney accent. "Michal" is the name on her tombstone, at the foot of Charles's in Oxford. It was as "Michal" that Charles referred to her throughout their marriage (Carpenter, *Inklings* 84, Ridler xviii).

The engagement between Florence and Charles was protracted, probably because of his inferior social status and his importance as family wage-earner. When World War I broke out, Charles was deemed unfit for military service because of a tremor of the hands, caused by childhood illness (Letter from Thelma Shuttleworth). After what must have seemed an interminable engagement, Charles Williams and Florence Conway were married on 12 April 1917. A son, their only child, was born in 1922, confusingly christened Michael Stansby (Carpenter, *Inklings* 85, 90; A. Hadfield 24-26; Ridler xviii).

"Their [i.e., Charles's and Florence's] marriage was a tempestuous one," writes their friend Anne Ridler. "No one who heard Charles Williams speak of the institution of marriage could doubt that he knew it to have been the ground of his own growth, though he never spoke of it as a grace that is easily won" (Ridler xviii). The Theology of Romantic Love, in which Williams found a mirror of divine Love and Self-giving in the human relationship of marriage, grew out of his own experience.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, he was much like Luther: theology and experience are part of the same whole.

Around the time of his marriage, Williams became an initiate into the Order of the Golden Dawn, an offshoot of Rosicrucianism founded by the scholar and mystic Arthur Edward Waite. Williams had probably been interested in magic in his childhood; he read Waite's book *The*

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*Hidden Church of the Holy Graal* (1904) when he was in his early twenties. Admiration for this book led Williams to correspond with Waite, and eventually to incorporate many of Waite's insights about the Grail into his Arthurian Poetry, *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944).<sup>6</sup> The Golden Dawn's membership included such figures as the poet William Butler Yeats and the mystic/scholar Evelyn Underhill. As is the case with Freemasonry and other such organizations, members of the Golden Dawn wore distinctive habits/ vestments and were sworn to secrecy about its rituals. Williams might have been attracted to the Golden Dawn by its ceremonial aspects. Although he resigned from the Order at an undetermined time, in the early 1920's, he retained some ritual items in his desk at the Oxford University Press, which his friend and biographer Alice Mary Hadfield reports he kept there until the Press moved to Oxford in 1939 (A. Hadfield 31; Carpenter, *Inklings* 86-87; Ridler xxiii-xxvi). Specific instances of Williams's reliance on occult knowledge gained from Waite and his books may be found in the Holy Graal of *War in Heaven*, the stone of Suleiman and the Tetragrammaton of *Many Dimensions*, the Tarot pack of *The Greater Trumps*, and magical spells in *All Hallows' Eve* and elsewhere. The interest was also reflected in his historical study *Witchcraft* (1941).

Did Williams believe in magical events? He certainly presented them with great seriousness and saw in their symbolism the same validity he found in Christian symbolism. Whether he found magic (of whatever form) to be of more validity than Christianity is difficult to say, but the answer certainly is tied to the whole question of his belief. As his biographer Humphrey Carpenter points out, this was an open question:

"No one can possibly do more than decide what to believe," says a character in one of his novels, and that was exactly what Williams himself thought. He had decided to believe in Christianity, but it was a conscious choice. As far as witchcraft and black magic were concerned, he avoided making any such decision. He used them in his books, but he did not say, or ask his readers to say, "true or false?" to such things. They were simply there. So, though he soon outgrew the Golden Dawn and left the Order (the date of this is not known), the symbolism and the knowledge of the occult that he had acquired during his membership remained valuable to him, not least because in its extreme form black magic was the polar opposite of Christianity; and his mind was always drawn to an awareness of the opposite pole of any argument or belief. (Carpenter 89)

During the first years of his marriage, the Oxford University Press published three books of Williams's poetry. Humphrey Milford, who was Publisher of the Oxford University Press from 1913 through the

rest of Williams's tenure there, became his advocate, having early recognized his talent. Williams, in turn, regarded Milford as a great man, symbolic of the hierarchical systems of the ancient world; he thrived under his patronage (A. Hadfield 19, 22, 58-59, etc.).

In response to a question about Charles Williams's relationship to the Oxford University Press, Charles Hadfield, who worked at the Press with Williams from 1936 to 1939, writes:

Start with the fact that CW had worked for the firm all his life and that the head of it, Humphrey Milford (later Sir Humphrey), very early on appreciated that he had got a very brilliant and totally eccentric employee. Therefore he published a number of CW's books even though he certainly lost money on the early ones, and he gave CW a very free hand as to how he worked, so long as he did work. Therefore CW was quite accustomed to doing his own writing in the firm's time and the firm's work in his own time, or any combination of the two that suited him. He looked thoroughly undisciplined, because he always wrote on his knee in very neat, very fast, writing with very few corrections. He had the ability to stop for an interruption and start again as soon as it was over without interruption of his thought. My impression therefore was that he was extremely self-disciplined but neither knewed nor cared about any business discipline, knowing that Sir Humphrey would not mind.

In the autumn of 1922, Williams began to supplement his salary from the Press by teaching evening adult education courses for the London County Council. He worked a full day at the Press; taught for two hours in the evening; and then went home, often working on poetry or his other private writing until very late at night. He was busy, and he worked hard (Ridler xix-xx). Charles Hadfield, responding to a question about Williams's work habits, writes:

I chuckled at your question "Where did his phenomenal energy come from?" Here you must put yourself back to pre-war [i.e., World War II] days. One worked first because one had to—no social security, no national health service—entirely dependent upon your job to keep yourself and wife and children, unemployment at too high a level to get another job easily. So, very hard work, in today's terms, was quite usual. If you did not, there were plenty of others who would. Secondly, he did have great energy, but he also wrote extremely efficiently. First he had an amazing memory which enabled him to quote *verbatim* from the Bible, pretty well any English poet, Dickens, Thackeray, and dozens more. Therefore he very seldom had to look up anything. Thirdly, his mind was so quick that he was always writing behind thought

that had already been arranged so that to write a book he had no need of synopses or drafts. One of his very best books, *He Came Down from Heaven*, was, I believe, written in six weeks.

Thelma Shuttleworth, a young woman who began attending Charles Williams's London County Council lectures in 1925 and remained his friend until his death, wrote of him in 1988:

This man was a poet—not a preacher or a teacher or any other sort of axe-grinder. He was a phenom—phenomen—they come in ones, rarely, rarely, and wasn't I lucky to bump into one and be absorbed! Oh yes, anyone who could say that one "ached with the infelicity of Time" knew all about It—whatever It is. . . the Co-inherence of the universe, of course. It was a constant source of conversation. I, young, complained one day that the perfection of a lovely happening was spoilt when I got home. It *was* perfect? Charles wanted to know. I said so. Then it was perfect in eternity, so how could it be spoilt? "Try not to be merely silly," was his acerbic comment! There was nothing esoteric about our way of talking.

Anne Ridler presents a further characterization of Williams's relationships with his students in those early years:

What his pupils learned from him as a general habit of mind, apart from the profit they derived from his wisdom and his knowledge in particular instances, was a vigilance in the use of words, and about commonly accepted opinions, which made them sharply sensitive to cant in all its forms. . . .

No one among his students was too dull to be listened to, or too grasping to be helped. . . . And in fact, however freely he seemed to give of his energies and even of his personal confidences, he had always a certain inner detachment—in the last resort, and however perfect the give and take of his human relationships, you felt that he depended on no one: he was not born under Virgo for nothing. The work he did for his pupils brought its rewards, and perhaps provided some recompense for the general lack of recognition of his genius, by what Ezra Pound has called "the pleasing attitudes of discipleship," but it took too much time and energy—and the sacrifice was also his wife's, of her share in his leisure.

This comment on use of his time points out that Williams was intensely public, but at the same time, no one got very close to him "in himself." Charles Hadfield observes that "he was a very private person, and I fancy very few people knew anything about his private life, or about his home generally and he never gossiped about anybody with anybody else—any confidence was always safe with CW."

Until 1939, Charles Williams worked for the Oxford University Press in London. The progress of his life can be measured, in those

years, by the friends he made and the books he published. Some of his "permanent pupils," whom he met either through his London County Council lectures or at the Press, were referred to as his "Household"; these included Alice Mary Hadfield and Thelma Shuttleworth. In the early 1930s, Williams met Dorothy L. Sayers, whom he later inspired by his work on Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943), to embark upon her own study of the great master. He also met W.H. Auden in 1937. Auden later wrote of his encounters with Williams:

I had met many good people before who made me feel ashamed of my own shortcomings, but in the presence of this man—we never discussed anything but literary business—I did not feel ashamed. I felt transformed into a person who was incapable of doing or thinking anything base or unloving. (I later discovered that he had had a similar effect on many other people.) (Carpenter, *Auden* 224)

In 1933 came Williams's first adult bout with serious illness. He was then forty-seven years old. "One Sunday," his friend Thelma Shuttleworth recalls, "he felt poorly; he and his wife suspected indigestion, but the pain became unbearable." Intussusception was diagnosed, "correctly (though it is something that occurs usually only with babies and old men: the intestinal tubes become telescoped, and death is almost inevitable), and the immediate operation was successful." He did not, however, tend to dwell upon his illness in conversation with his friends. "He had early in life discovered that 'the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain,' and that there was little he could do about that. . . such constants did not provide interesting conversational gambits. We never discussed health, our own or anyone else's, except in passing" (Shuttleworth). Williams missed three weeks of work after the attack. "Once recovered," recalls Alice Mary Hadfield, "he did not ail but was energetic in voice and walk, though the thick hair now showed a little gray" (91).

Williams undertook all types of writing as a way of supplementing his income. Nonetheless, Anne Ridler notes that money was certainly not the only motivation for Williams to write; he might very well have written without it. However, Williams's poetry may have suffered for lack of a paying public that recognized his genius:

In the case of Charles Williams, the lines of communication between his poetic activity and the nourishment of an audience were inadequate. He never lacked a few appreciative readers, but these were such as perhaps enabled him to take too much understanding for granted. . . . [A] wider audience of all kinds of people, interested but not partisan, such as Williams only began to have in his last years, does tend to

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make poetry less obscure, less odd, more urbane in the best sense. And one thing is incontrovertable—that Williams's chief work, his cycle of poems, was left unfinished because it could not earn him money. (Ridler li)

The first of Williams's novels to be written, originally titled *The Black Bastard* (later to be renamed *Shadows of Ecstasy*), waited from its penning in 1925 until 1933 to be published. The firm of Victor Gollancz published five of Williams's seven novels in the early 1930s. *The Corpse* (Williams's original title for *War in Heaven*), written in 1926, was the first of the novels to see publication, thanks to the persistence of one of Williams's editorial assistants. *War in Heaven* was a modest commercial success, and Victor Gollancz encouraged Williams, "as a reader and a publisher," to write more (A. Hadfield 81-82). There followed, in quick succession, *Many Dimensions* (1931), *The Place of the Lion* (1931), and *The Greater Trumps* (1932) (A. Hadfield 92-93).

The five Gollancz novels are all at least partially set in the city of London, which Williams saw as the center of the world. Religion and God, except for *War in Heaven*, are not the primary focus of these books. People, in these novels, make their own choices, and their character develops out of those choices. In all of Williams's novels, including these first five, each person has the opportunity to shape his or her own salvation or damnation. There is no *deus ex machina* to save persons from the consequences of their choices. Power, of both temporal and supernatural varieties, is another common theme in the novels. As Europe moved toward another global war, the demonic side of political power was a natural subject for Williams to treat. Particularly in his last novel, *All Hallows' Eve* (1945), in the figure of Simon the Clerk, Williams touches upon the false charisma of demagogues and the false healing offered by glib-tongued orators. One can glimpse shadows of Hitler lurking in the background. Although Williams was not a political man—his busy life left him little time for such extraneous interests—he was an astute observer of human behaviour. Belief in the ultimate value of human life, and not its brevity and futility, permeates all the novels.

Williams never achieved a great following for his novels, in spite of their championing by T.S. Eliot (who later convinced his publishing firm of Faber and Faber to bring out *Descent into Hell*, *All Hallows' Eve* and *The Figure of Beatrice*). He did, however, benefit from a friendship with C.S. Lewis, who first read *The Place of the Lion* in 1936. As it happened, Williams was reading the proofs for Lewis's *Allegory of Love* for the Oxford University Press at about the same time. Through Sir Humphrey Milford, Williams heard that Lewis had been saying complimentary things about *The Place of the Lion*. Lewis wrote to Williams early in March, 1936, expressing his delight in the book. Williams, in

turn, wrote back to Lewis, suggesting that they meet when Lewis next came to London. The two men continued to meet occasionally for the rest of the time Williams worked in London, up until the Press moved to Oxford in 1939 (Carpenter, *Inklings* 107-08).

Early in the 1920s, Williams began to develop theological categories, which would play an important role in his later work. These concepts grew out of Williams's own maturing understanding of the place of Christ's sacrifice on the cross in human history, and the revolution that sacrifice effected in human relationships. Briefly, his terms can be explained as follows:

1. *Co-inherence*: Christ died once, for all people. Christ's risen life is thus a part of every human life. Because of this shared characteristic, every human being has part of every other human being. People cannot be divided from one another, even given differing life-circumstances, because Christ is not divided.

2. *Exchange*: Every human being lives by or with every other human being, from birth until death. We are born through the exchange of physical life by our parents. We live because of the efforts of others, from the growing of the food we eat, to the governing of the country in which we dwell. These human relationships mirror the giving Christ effected on the cross, of himself to all people.

3. *Substitution*: Because of Christ's having died on our behalf, and our co-inherence with every other person, it is possible for us to "bear one another's burdens" in a conscious and voluntary way. We can relieve someone else of worry, pain, or terror, by love.<sup>7</sup>

It must also be noted that Williams believed all of life to be connected, through co-inherence, in all times and locations. Exchange and substitution can take place between the living and the dead, the living and the as yet unborn (A. Hadfield 32).

Williams spoke often of these concepts with his friends. By the late 1930s, he bowed to pressure from his friends and formed an Order based on his principles. This loosely-knit group, which he called the Companions of the Co-Inherence, was given a constitution in September, 1939, complete with biblical references:

1. The Order has no constitution except in its members. As it was said: *Others he saved, himself he cannot save.*
2. It recommends nevertheless that its members shall make a formal act of union with it and of recognition of their own nature. As it was said: *Am I my brother's keeper?*
3. Its concern is the practice of the apprehension of the Co-inherence both as a natural and a supernatural principle. As it was said: *Let us make man in Our image.*
4. It is therefore, *per necessitatem*, Christian. As it was said: *And who ever says there was when this was not, let him be anathema.*

5. It recommends therefore the study, on the contemplative side, of the Co-inherence of the Holy and Blessed Trinity, of the Two Natures in the Single Person, of the Mother and Son, of the communicated Eucharist, and of the whole Catholic Church. As it was said: *figlia del tuo figlio*. And on the active side, of methods of exchange, in the State, in all forms of love, and in all natural things, such as childbirth. As it was said: *Bear ye one another's burdens*.
6. It concludes in the Divine Substitution of Messiah [one of Williams's terms for Christ] all forms of exchange and substitution, and it invokes this Act as the root of all. As it was said: *He must become, as it were, a double man*.
7. The Order will associate itself primarily with four feasts: the Feast of the Annunciation, the Feast of the Blessed Trinity, the Feast of the Transfiguration, and the Commemoration of All Souls. As it was said: *Another will be in me and I in him*. (A. Hadfield 173-74)

That Williams took his Order very seriously can be seen from his dedication of *The Descent of the Dove* to the Companions of the Co-Inherence.

The late 1930s was a tremendously productive time for Charles Williams. While trying to cope with his wife's and son's bouts of pneumonia, in 1936 Williams wrote his first theological work, *He Came Down from Heaven*, which was published in 1938. Also in 1936, Williams was engaged to write a play to follow T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) for the Canterbury Festival. The resulting verse drama, *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, won critical as well as public acclaim (A. Hadfield 135). After years of composing and polishing, Williams published the first volume of his Arthurian poetry, *Taliessin through Logres*, in 1938. Alice Mary Hadfield says of the Taliessin poems:

Thinking and writing his Arthurian poems became a triple "articulation" to Charles: of the relevance of myth to life; the finding of the exact word to catch the flash of his vision; and of relation of the human body to the principles and forms of the physical universe, in both of which the Spirit lived and moved. . . . To him, the Grail, or the presence of Christ, was potentially everywhere and in all times. (151)

This sense of the coincidence of times and places is one of the curious features of Williams's novels, and is suggested most strikingly in *Descent into Hell*. *The Descent of the Dove*, another theological work, subtitled *A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*, was published in 1939.

The Oxford University Press, like many London firms, had been making contingency plans for moving out of London once war began. Charles Williams, with the Press, moved out of the city around 7

September 1939. Unlike the Press, however, Charles Williams would never resume residence in London (A. Hadfield 176-77).

### 3. *The Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1939 to 1945*

When the war began, Charles Williams was fifty-two years old. He was tired from the constant struggle to keep up with the responsibilities of work at the Oxford University Press, his lectures, his poetry and other private publications, and his family. Moving out of London meant not only leaving behind what Williams believed to be the archetype of the City of God; it also meant adjustment to the austerities and tensions of war; disruption of long-established patterns of work and commerce; and ultimately separation from his family. Although he had initially planned to bring his wife and son to Oxford for the duration, Florence was put off by the accommodation Williams had found with the Spalding family at 9 South Parks Road. She returned to London with Michael. Williams went to London as often as he could and wrote to Florence virtually every other day for the next five and a half years.<sup>8</sup>

Shortly after Williams's arrival in Oxford, C.S. Lewis invited him to join with a group of his friends who met in his rooms at Magdalen College, to read their works in progress. This Thursday evening group, called the "Inklings," had been meeting regularly since 1933. The Inklings, besides C.S. Lewis and his brother Warren, included J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, Colin Hardie, and Gervase Mathew (Carpenter, *Inklings* 280-86). By November of 1939, Williams had become part of this informal body. The first work Williams read to the Inklings was his Nativity play, *The House by the Stable*. Williams found both lucid criticism for his writing, and support and friendship for himself among the Inklings. Alone among the group, Williams was neither a University graduate nor an academic. The conversation and critique format of Inklings meetings gave Williams a chance to hone his perceptions about literature and test his theories about poets such as Milton and Wordsworth, for whom he had a particular fondness. Among the Inklings, Williams could debate with intellectual equals, and he relished the smoke-filled Thursday night gatherings (Carpenter, *Inklings* 123-25).

Through his contacts with the Inklings, Williams found University life opened to him. C.S. Lewis had been so impressed by Williams's reactions to Lewis's lectures on Milton, given during the autumn (Michaelmas) term of 1939, that he arranged for Williams to lecture for the English faculty of the University on the same subject. Lewis was determined "to smuggle [Williams] into the Oxford lecture list, so that we might have some advantage from the great man's accidental presence in Oxford" (qtd. in Carpenter, *Inklings* 127). Williams's first lecture, on 29 January 1940, went well and was gratifyingly attended by a number of undergraduates. The

following week, however, Williams was brilliant. In his lecture on Milton's *Comus*, Williams talked about Chastity. C.S. Lewis, who attended the lecture, wrote of the experience to his brother Warren:

Simply as criticism it was superb because here was a man who really started from the same point of view as Milton and 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 room full of modern young men and women sitting in that absolute silence which can *not* be faked, very puzzled, but spell-bound: perhaps with something of the same feeling which a lecture on *unchastity* might have evoked in their grandparents—the forbidden subject broached at last. He forced them to lap it up and I think many, by the end, liked the taste more than they expected to. It was "borne in upon me" that that beautiful carved room had probably not witnessed anything so important since some of the great medieval or Reformation lectures. I have at last, if only for once, seen a university doing what it was founded to do: teaching wisdom. (Carpenter, *Inklings* 128; Lewis 177; A. Hadfield 187-88)

Through the *Inklings*, but particularly with C.S. Lewis, Williams found male companionship of a sort he had not experienced consistently since before World War I. Friendship with Lewis and the others went beyond the kind of admiring, and inherently unequal, teacher/student relationships he had long had with young women who attended his London County Council lectures.

As the war progressed, Williams found himself becoming increasingly involved in University life. His 1939 Milton lectures were followed by regular lecturing and tutoring at St. Hilda's College, and University lectures on Wordsworth and Shakespeare. He gave lectures in 1943 on Arthurian Tradition in English Literature, and on Christian Literature and Drama, for a diverse audience that ranged from the Oxford Graduates Society to the Student Christian Movement. In 1944, his lecture schedule included thirteen on Shakespeare and eight on eighteenth-century poetry. He lectured on Milton again in 1945 (A. Hadfield 188).

In a University community, in order to appear fully qualified for what he was doing—as if he were not already!—Williams needed bona fide University credentials. C.S. Lewis and others on the English faculty arranged for Williams to be granted an honorary Master of Arts degree on 18 February 1943. The citation for his degree noted the new style of poetry Williams had introduced in *Taliessin through Logres* and *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (A. Hadfield 188-89).

While he was in Oxford, Williams wrote two verse plays, *The House by the Stable* and *The Death of Good Fortune* for the Oxford branch of

the Pilgrim Players, who had earlier tried to produce his play *Seed of Adam*. He wrote a number of articles for literary and religious periodicals. His historical study *Witchcraft* was published by Faber and Faber in 1941. Williams also wrote two lengthy pamphlets in 1941, *The Way of Exchange*, in which he spoke of his three doctrines of co-inherence, exchange, and substitution, as being present in the relationships of family life; and *Religion and Love in Dante*, in which he explained his Theology of Romantic Love in the relationship between Dante and Beatrice that grows and changes through the three volumes of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Williams further refined his perceptions of Dante in his longer 1943 work, *The Figure of Beatrice* (A. Hadfield 195-203).

The companion volume to *He Came Down from Heaven* was written at the behest of the publisher Geoffrey Bles in 1942; subsequent editions of this book, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, also included the earlier work. During 1943, Williams wrote an essay, "The Cross," which was submitted for a collection entitled, "What the Cross Means to Me: A Symposium." This, Williams's clearest statement of the doctrine of the atonement, came in what was for many the darkest year of the war. Both *The Forgiveness of Sins* and "The Cross" rely heavily on Williams's deep thought about and experience of co-inherence, exchange, and substitution, and his perception that an action that occurred once in history (i.e., the crucifixion) *can* influence life in the present. He was also profoundly aware of the historical Jesus, of the intersection of human suffering with divine grace, within time, at the point of the cross. The Eucharist was, according to Alice Mary Hadfield, "the centre of his thought and so his life" (212).

In 1942 and 1943, Williams completed the Arthurian poems that would be published in 1944 as *The Region of the Summer Stars*, a sequel to *Taliessin through Logres*. A biography, *Flecker of Dean Close*; a verse play, *The House of the Octopus*; and a novel, *All Hallows' Eve*, came from the closing years of the war. To his friends, Williams did not appear to be any different in the final years of his life from what he had always been, although he attended daily Morning Prayer more frequently than he had earlier in the war (A. Hadfield 216-17). *The Figure of Beatrice* had brought him what he had sought for so long: public recognition of his work. His late writings enjoyed a much more enthusiastic following, particularly in Oxford, than his earlier works had done (Carpenter, *Inklings* 216). He planned a third volume of his Arthurian cycle, but that remained unfinished at the time of his death. C.S. Lewis ultimately collected Williams's fragmentary *Figure of Arthur* into a critical volume called *The Arthurian Torso*, which was published in 1948 by the Oxford University Press (Carpenter, *Inklings* 291-92).

As the war drew to a close, Williams faced a vocational dilemma. He felt superfluous at the Oxford University Press; his work was not

exciting. He had the feeling that he was wanted in Oxford at some capacity in the University, but he received no firm offers. He hoped C.S. Lewis might be able to arrange a Readership in the English Faculty for him. And, perhaps on a more profound psychological level, he no longer felt the same place-attachment to London that he had before the war. He felt that he belonged in Oxford. But Williams was wearing himself out among his own writing projects, University lecturing and tutoring, and the Oxford University Press (Carpenter, *Inklings* 217-18). It looked very much as if Williams would be returning with the Press to London after the war; his correspondence of April and early May, 1945, betrays a sense of resignation to the move back. He did, after all, have his pension from the Press to protect, and he was practical enough to realize that he could not expect to support himself and his family solely on earnings from his writing. A post at the University remained an unfulfilled dream (219-20).

World War II ended in Europe on 9 May 1945. Less than a week later, Charles Williams was dead. On 10 May, he had felt ill. For a day or two, he felt no improvement. By Saturday, 12 May, he was sick enough to go into hospital. His wife came up from London. Williams underwent surgery for the same internal disorder that had felled him in 1933, on 14 May. He never regained consciousness. Charles Williams died in the Radcliffe Infirmary on Tuesday, 15 May 1945.<sup>9</sup> He was buried in the unconsecrated ground of the Church of St. Cross-Holywell in Oxford (Ridler xxx).<sup>10</sup>

"Poet," says his gravestone. Perhaps in the end, Williams needs to be seen in precisely this light: as one "who is specially gifted in the perception and expression of the beautiful or lyrical" (Definition of "poet," Morris 1011). Williams seems to have defined himself, in a passage from his 1932 book *The English Poetic Mind*, which speaks of great poets:

Our capacities then for some sort of general experience of the world are awakened by the greater masters. As far as poetry is concerned it does not matter what that capacity is: Macbeth is as poetically effective as Samson. Both express our sense of a faculty for taking in many experiences as a whole, for knowing and enjoying them in the exquisite sensuous delight of words. Anybody who can cause us to do that is a great poet. (8)

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Williams himself always spoke of his having been born in Islington, a borough of London where his father also was born and married (Ridler xi).

<sup>2</sup>There is a discrepancy among the sources as to which hospital was the place of Williams's death. W.H. Lewis reports that it was the Acland (Kilby

206-07). Alice Mary Hadfield reports that it was the Radcliffe Infirmary (235). A certified copy of Williams's death certificate, obtained in Oxford in August, 1992, indicates that the Radcliffe Infirmary was, indeed, the place of death.

<sup>2</sup>For a complete bibliography, see Ridler 196-99.

<sup>4</sup>Williams, Florence Conway. "As I Remember." *Episcopal Churchwoman* 12 April 1953. Qtd. in Ridler xvii.

<sup>5</sup>Williams elaborated on this topic in *Outlines of Romantic Theology*. Written around 1924, this long essay was never published in Williams's lifetime, but appeared in an American edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans), edited by Alice Mary Hadfield, in 1990. The peculiarities of capitalization, e.g., for "Romantic Love," are Williams's.

<sup>6</sup>For specific instances of such literary dependence, see Brewer 54-66.

<sup>7</sup>Alice Mary Hadfield explains these terms on 32.

<sup>8</sup>Carpenter, *Inklings* 120-22; Hadfield 176-77. A visit to the site in August, 1992, revealed that 9 South Parks Road is now part of the complex housing the Department of Zoology of Oxford University. The house was, apparently, demolished prior to construction of the facility.

<sup>9</sup>See note #4, above.

<sup>10</sup>The reason for Williams's burial outside the consecrated churchyard of St. Cross-Holywell is probably more prosaic than poetic; not because of some theological objection, on Williams's part, to consecrated ground, but because that part of the property was full. As a regular communicant, Williams would have been entitled to a consecrated plot. Although the whole area surrounding his grave was not consecrated, his individual space probably was. This explanation of the reason for the place of Williams's burial was originally given to Dr. James Pain, Professor of Religion at Drew University by a priest attached to St. Cross-Holywell. This note comes from a conversation with Dr. Pain on 30 November 1990.

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