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Charles Williams: The Third Inkling (Book Review)

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Charles Williams: The Third Inkling. By Grevel Lindop. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-19-928415-3. Pp. xii +493. $34.95.

In the introduction to his biography of Samuel Johnson, James Boswell proclaims: "I profess to write, not his panegyric, which must be all praise, but his Life; which, great and good as he was, must not be supposed to be entirely perfect." Grevel Lindop, in writing *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling*, might have used Boswell's criterion as his mantra. As Lindop documents meticulously throughout his impressive study—drawing on letters, private papers, and more than twenty interviews with those who knew the poet—some of Williams's behaviors were not only less than perfect, but deeply troubling.

The story's disturbing parts for most readers will be those detailing Williams's personal life, which Lindop calls at the book's outset "strange and troubled" (viii): specifically that Williams fell in love with a woman (Phyllis Jones) at his workplace and carried on a long affair with her (albeit one that was never consummated sexually); while Williams's wife, Michal, knew about the love affair, Williams tried to hide the extent of his devotion to Phyllis from his wife through lies and diversions; in addition to Phyllis, Williams cultivated a long series of sado-masochistic relationships with younger women, relationships that he came to believe were necessary to fuel his creativity; in spite of the fact most of the women "disciples" involved believed "Williams had transformed their lives for the better," on his side "a compulsive pattern of dependency had developed" (340). Lindop so thoroughly documents the numerous incidents that by the time we read of the last one with Lois Lang-Sims (27 years old) and Charles Williams (57 years old),

we are forced to agree with Lindop's conclusion that, for Williams, "it had become an addiction" (340).

While William's sexually charged, mentor-disciple relationships with younger women are likely to alarm all readers, Christian readers, in particular, may be puzzled by Williams's interest in and initiation into occult groups as well as his magical pursuits. Though a lifelong Anglican, Williams yearned for spiritual experiences and knowledge beyond the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. Lindop notes that Williams found these through involvement in A. E. Waite's Fellowship of the Rosy Cross and perhaps in the Order of the Golden Dawn. Both were Rosicrucian organizations. While the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross remained entirely Christian and mystical, avoiding magic, the Golden Dawn had "accepted practical magic—the use of paranormal methods to change the world in accordance with the magician's will" (59). Lindop also describes how Williams's met weekly with A. H. E. (Henry) Lee and D. H. S. Nicholson. Topics of discussion in this group involved alchemy, the Kabbala, astrology, breathing exercises, and the transformation of sexual energy for spiritual purposes.

While Lindop admits the extent to which Williams's activities could be described as magical is open to question, the uniqueness of Williams among the Inklings hit home with full force when I read the account of what occurred the day after Williams died: Joan Wallis, one of Charles's "women," was allowed into Charles's office, "where she removed from the cupboard his magical regalia--the sword she had so much disliked, his Rosicrucian robes, and perhaps other items," all of which she took the home where

Williams had been living and buried them in the garden (423). The reason Joan Wallis disliked the sword is because Williams had used it to "gently spank" her as part of one of his rituals in his office. Lindop also notes that ritual swords were used in one branch of the Golden Dawn and that Williams may have acquired his sword after D. H. S. Nicholson's death. Thus, these two odd and secret strands of Williams's life story come together: his sado-masochistic relationships with women and his practice of the occult and the magical.

By highlighting these two aspects of Charles Williams's life, I do not mean to imply that Lindop's presentation is primarily negative nor that he tries to sensationalize his life. In fact, Lindop is objective and fair throughout, allowing the letters and interview responses to speak for themselves and showing admirable restraint by avoiding speculation when the facts are unknown. While Lindop does not shy away from the disturbing parts of Williams's story, his biography gives us much to admire and celebrate about this amazingly complex poet, novelist, dramatist, biographer, journalist, editor, theologian, teacher, husband, father, and friend.

Lindop organizes his biography chronologically, each chapter recounting multiple events while centering on a unifying theme. This approach lends a dramatic effect to the book. The reader has the sense that this story is going somewhere, that not only does Williams's life story have a discernible arc but that many individual strands of his story are moving either toward a happy or tragic conclusion. Williams was an ambitious writer who wanted, most of all, to be recognized as a great poet. Lindop, a poet himself, place Williams's verse in context and makes a convincing argument that his poetry deserves

greater recognition than it has yet received. But Williams was also a man of diverse interests and talents, and he was a workaholic who pursued his art obsessively to the detriment of his relationships with his wife, Michal, and son, Michael. Though, as Lindop documents, Williams took on many of his writing jobs out of financial necessity.

Charles Williams was already far advanced in his career as writer and Oxford University Press editor when he met C. S. Lewis. Lindop documents Lewis's endless fascination with Williams and Tolkien's fondness for Williams (as well as the way Williams's feedback to Tolkien helped shape *The Lord of the Rings*). Additionally, he notes when the OUP moved to Oxford, the Inklings meetings made life bearable for Williams.

While most of this material will be familiar to those versed in Inklings lore, Lindop breaks new ground as well. Williams's view of Lewis and the Inklings was complex and not altogether positive. For example, Williams expressed doubts about Lewis's hugely popular radio broadcasts on Christianity, feeling that many important points were omitted, and was of the opinion that he possessed a subtler theological mind than did his friend, Lewis. Then, too, a certain class consciousness was always present as Williams could never forget he was from the lower class than the other Inklings. Lindop provides insight into an interesting phenomenon that played out in several of Williams's relationships with other authors including Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers. Because Williams had such a fertile mind and imagination and shared his ideas freely with his friends, Williams, on occasion, perceived that his friends took those ideas, developed them, and received credit for them instead of Williams. Two cases in point are Lewis's

Preface to Paradise Lost, which borrowed from Williams's Oxford lectures, and Dorothy L. Sayers's Dante translation. Sayers noted she had been inspired to read Dante, and ultimately, to translate his works by reading Williams's *The Figure of Beatrice.* Williams also grumbled about being "press-ganged" into "Dorothy Sayers's committees for explaining or defending or promulgating or elucidating or doing something or other to the faith. I do not love the faith so much as all that; though I trust . . .yes I do trust" (405).

This last comment reminds us some of Williams's theological ideas were unique. Williams is widely known for his belief in co-inherence and substitution, "whereby one person could voluntarily take over the suffering—mental or physical—of another" (156). As with his mystical interests, Williams was not content to theorize. He established with a group of friends the Order of the Co-inherence with himself as head, and his instructions to its members were at times stated as commands, not requests. It's interesting to speculate about what some of the other Inklings thought of Williams's theology. We do know that while C. S. Lewis practiced substitution during Joy's illness, he never adopted Williams's romantic theology (259).

Lindop's biography is admirable for the attention it pays, not only to Williams as poet but to the many facets of his artistic and creative life, for example, Williams's active life as a lecturer and teacher—at evening colleges, at Oxford, at mystical and Christian societies. Students from St Anne's College, where Williams served as a tutor during his final years, reported Williams was courteous, revealed a genuine interest in and love of poetry, and had the ability to get them excited about poetic technique. He never made them feel ashamed of their lack of knowledge or understanding; rather he encouraged

them to engage the text directly, not to rely on criticism, but to experience the words for themselves. His students reported feeling they were lifted up to another plane with Williams in their understanding and appreciation of poetry.

Lindop's life of Williams is an impressive achievement. He paints a nuanced portrait of a complicated man. He places Williams squarely in his literary context, highlighting the extent to which his role as OUP editor allowed him to establish connections, and often friendships, with many important early twentieth-authors--W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Graves, Dylan Thomas, and Philip Larkin--and how, late in life, he finally achieved the literary reputation he had sought so long and that allowed him to influence a younger generation of writers.

Lindop's book delineates the ways in which this "third Inkling" is similar to but very different than Lewis and Tolkien. While it is true that Lewis held his own unique theological ideas (e.g., his belief that pagan myths were good dreams preparing the way for Christianity), both Tolkien and Lewis adopted largely orthodox positions relative to their respective faiths. Influenced by his reading of Barth and Kierkegaard, Williams's theology could be not only unique but even dark. For example, his radio play *The Three Temptations* presents Judas as everyman and shows little faith in either established institutions or the impulses of most human beings. Williams struggled frequently with doubt; he once described his feelings as "a mixture of profound faith with the sense that life is almost unbearable" (350). Finally, unlike Lewis and Tolkien, who were conservative politically, Lindop describes Williams as the "only left-wing Inkling" (viii). These differences explain why a contemporary blog devoted to Williams is named "The

Oddest Inkling." It may be that contemporary readers who are more progressive in their theological and political views will find in Williams an Inkling more to their taste.

Lindop has performed his biographical task well and has given us for the first time in one place the information we need to assess Williams's legacy as Christian writer. Of course, even a solid researcher like Lindop cannot tell us all we would like to know about Williams and his relationships, such as how much Lewis and Tolkien knew about Williams's occult and magical practices and about his mentor-disciple relationships with young women. I suspect questions like these, and Lindop's biography, will be the subjects of vigorous discussions among lovers of Charles Williams and the Inklings for years to come.

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