January 1971

The Impact of Charles Williams' Death on C.S. Lewis

Rolan M. Kawano

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythpro

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythpro/vol1/iss2/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythcon Proceedings by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.
Abstract
Recounts the beginnings of the friendship of Lewis and Williams and Williams's later association with the Inklings until his death following complications from surgery in May 1945. Discusses the effect of his death on C.S. Lewis's thoughts about mortality and reprints his poem "On the Death of Charles Williams."

Keywords
Inklings; Lewis, C.S.—Friends and associates—Charles Williams; Williams, Charles—Friends and associates—C.S. Lewis

This article is available in Mythcon Proceedings: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythpro/vol1/iss2/10
Kawano: The Impact of Charles Williams' Death on C.S. Lewis
by Roland M. Kawano

May, 1945 was important both in the lives of England and C.S. Lewis. England was just completing a long and wearisome war; on the seventh of May Germany was to surrender unconditionally at Rheims. The war years brought Lewis a growing reputation and the reputation, "Apostle to the Skeptics," especially with the American publication of The Screwtape Letters in 1943. In Lewis' life May also brought the death of his best friend, Charles Williams. Earlier, the war had brought Williams into much closer contact with Oxford and England, the literary discussion group to which both Williams and Lewis belonged.

An editor with Amens House of Oxford University Press, Charles Williams had not been able to finish at University College for lack of finances and to get his education editing the Oxford Men's House. Although he was best known for The Figure of Beatitude, The English Poet's Mind, and Poetry at Present, Lewis felt that Williams' criticism was his least valuable work. Williams was a romantic theologian, "one who is theologically about that these gatherings of people who are centered on that aesthetic, "Lewis had initially heard of Williams at a dinner where Dr. R.W. Chapman called Williams; novels "spiritual shockers," but it was not until several years later when Lewis again met with Nevil Coghill that Lewis was fully awakened to Williams. Furthermore Coghill was preparing Williams' The Place of the Lion. Lewis left that evening with Coghill's copy and the next day wrote to Williams, neither of whom had met before, to congratulate him. By return mail Williams wrote that he was just about to do the same for Lewis' Allegory of Love.

In summary: Dispel's judgment on the Magister with a High and Lonely Destiny is well borne out by the comparison with others in the tradition. Most of these are driven by inner hunger and are self-deceived. Those who come closest to Williams' characters, Aeneas or Aeneid, all too often miasma themselves and do not claim to be from the common restrictions. For they are so deeply lonely that they are sensitive to the value in others, and have inner resources out of which they draw to become self-giving.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Impact of Charles Williams' Death on C.S. Lewis
by Roland M. Kawano

May, 1945 was important both in the lives of England and C.S. Lewis. England was just completing a long and wearisome war; on the seventh of May Germany was to surrender unconditionally at Rheims. The war years brought Lewis a growing reputation and the reputation, "Apostle to the Skeptics," especially with the American publication of The Screwtape Letters in 1943. In Lewis' life May also brought the death of his best friend, Charles Williams. Earlier, the war had brought Williams into much closer contact with Oxford and England, the literary discussion group to which both Williams and Lewis belonged.

An editor with Amens House of Oxford University Press, Charles Williams had not been able to finish at University College for lack of finances and to get his education editing the Oxford Men's House. Although he was best known for The Figure of Beatitude, The English Poet's Mind, and Poetry at Present, Lewis felt that Williams' criticism was his least valuable work. Williams was a romantic theologian, "one who is theologically about that these gatherings of people who are centered on that aesthetic, "Lewis had initially heard of Williams at a dinner where Dr. R.W. Chapman called Williams; novels "spiritual shockers," but it was not until several years later when Lewis again met with Nevil Coghill that Lewis was fully awakened to Williams. Furthermore Coghill was preparing Williams' The Place of the Lion. Lewis left that evening with Coghill's copy and the next day wrote to Williams, neither of whom had met before, to congratulate him. By return mail Williams wrote that he was just about to do the same for Lewis' Allegory of Love.

In summary: Dispel's judgment on the Magister with a High and Lonely Destiny is well borne out by the comparison with others in the tradition. Most of these are driven by inner hunger and are self-deceived. Those who come closest to Williams' characters, Aeneas or Aeneid, all too often miasma themselves and do not claim to be from the common restrictions. For they are so deeply lonely that they are sensitive to the value in others, and have inner resources out of which they draw to become self-giving.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

May, 1945 was important both in the lives of England and C.S. Lewis. England was just completing a long and wearisome war; on the seventh of May Germany was to surrender unconditionally at Rheims. The war years brought Lewis a growing reputation and the reputation, "Apostle to the Skeptics," especially with the American publication of The Screwtape Letters in 1943. In Lewis' life May also brought the death of his best friend, Charles Williams. Earlier, the war had brought Williams into much closer contact with Oxford and England, the literary discussion group to which both Williams and Lewis belonged.

An editor with Amens House of Oxford University Press, Charles Williams had not been able to finish at University College for lack of finances and to get his education editing the Oxford Men's House. Although he was best known for The Figure of Beatitude, The English Poet's Mind, and Poetry at Present, Lewis felt that Williams' criticism was his least valuable work. Williams was a romantic theologian, "one who is theologically about that these gatherings of people who are centered on that aesthetic, "Lewis had initially heard of Williams at a dinner where Dr. R.W. Chapman called Williams; novels "spiritual shockers," but it was not until several years later when Lewis again met with Nevil Coghill that Lewis was fully awakened to Williams. Furthermore Coghill was preparing Williams' The Place of the Lion. Lewis left that evening with Coghill's copy and the next day wrote to Williams, neither of whom had met before, to congratulate him. By return mail Williams wrote that he was just about to do the same for Lewis' Allegory of Love.

In summary: Dispel's judgment on the Magister with a High and Lonely Destiny is well borne out by the comparison with others in the tradition. Most of these are driven by inner hunger and are self-deceived. Those who come closest to Williams' characters, Aeneas or Aeneid, all too often miasma themselves and do not claim to be from the common restrictions. For they are so deeply lonely that they are sensitive to the value in others, and have inner resources out of which they draw to become self-giving.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
rooms at Magdalen college. There were no fixed rules to the meetings although it was understood that "behind the door, as late as one could arrive." There was, however, a kind of unvarying ritual. When half-a-dozen or so had arrived, pipes lit and tea poured, Jack (as Lewis always wanted himself called in preference to Clive Staples) would say, "Well, has anybody got anything to read?" Out would come a manuscript, and this would settle down the evening's interest. The poetical interests of the night were of coursevspoke, but they would be interspersed with whatever else was read, and this criterion of the night's interest was more or less followed. It was a kind of unvarying routine, but it was not always so, for there was much variation in the books and the literary interests of the inquirers.

"The Lord of the Rings." Roy Campbell read "translations of a couple of Spanish poems," David Cecil read a chapter of his forthcoming book on Gray, and Warren Lewis, a scholar on the reign of Louis XIV, read "the first chapter of my first book." Charles Williams read his All Hallows' Eve and Lewis himself read his Perelandra. They were all read aloud, each as it was written. They gave a good deal to the hard-hitting criticism of the circle.15 Father Gervase Mathews, who will appear later, was also present.16 The inquirers shared a deep comradeship, but friendship did not bar harsh criticism when it was needed. H. M. Blamires, one of Lewis's former students, wrote that Lewis had a "near-fanatical devotion to Charles Williams, but when Williams wrote a bad book Lewis described it as 'bloody awful.'"

On the world scene the war in the European theatre was drawing to a close. On the second of May Germany surrendered in Italy. On the fifth they surrendered in Northwest Germany, Holland and Denmark. And on the seventh Germany made the complete and unconditional surrender at Rheims.

The English wished news of peace to be received anywhere. Oxford University press promised a holiday in celebration, and most of the staff of Southfield House were already planning to go to London. On Tuesday May eighth Williams commented to Helen Peacock, the Dorothy, that his main wish was to see his eldest friends whom he had known the Oxford Press staff since 1916. "Well, you and I, Dorothy, will be there as usual at our desks," Later in the day Williams met Gervase Mathews and asked him to say a Mass "for anyone I have ever loved in any way." Father Mathew did not object, said the Mass, but felt that Williams had a 'sense that he was going to die.'

On Wednesday May ninth the news of peace was received, and Southfield house was deserted except for Williams, Miss Peacock and a few others. That night Williams and his daughter of the family he lived with, in Oxford, to watch the English town for victory. However, seized with pain the next day, Williams cancelled all his work arrangements, staying in his rooms. That Thursday evening the inquirers met without him.

Since the war had separated them, on Friday Mrs. Williams came up from London. Although the pain had disappeared, Williams was taken to Radcliffe Hospital where he was operated on for a recurrence of internal troubles which had first appeared eleven years earlier. Williams never recovered consciousness and died after fifty-nine years on Tuesday May fifteenth.

Although the inquirers learned that Williams was at Radcliffe, they did not at all expect anything serious. On Tuesday morning, the fifteenth, just before they were to meet, the Eagle and Child, Lewis went to Radcliffe to lend Williams a book and perhaps to take back a message from him to the inquirers. When he arrived, he learned of Williams' death. He went to the pub to tell them what had happened: "When I joined them with my actual message--it was only a few minutes walk from the Infirmary, but I remember, the very streets looked different--I had some difficulty in making them believe or even understand what had happened. The world seemed to us at that moment primarily a strange one. We began to see that the very appearance of so many bereaved peoples, 'of the ubiquitous presence of a dead man, as if he had ceased to meet us in particular places in order to meet us everywhere.'"19

Charles Williams was buried in St. Cross Churchyard, Holywell, Oxford, "where lie the bodies of Kenneth Grahame and P. P. M. Bocock." After the funeral one of Williams' friends told Lewis as they were sitting in Addison's walk:

Our Lord told the disciples it was expedient for them that He should go away for otherwise the Comforter would not come to them. I do not think it blasphemy to suppose that what was true archetypally, and in eminence, of His death may, in the appropriate degree, be true of the deaths of all His followers. Williams' death had a profound effect on C. S. Lewis for he says, "No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams' death. It was not just the idea of death that was changed; it was the idea of death that was changed." Only after Williams' death did the inquirers realize that "a small and late addition to the company of those who loved him, and whom we loved."21 Williams' death did the Inklings realize "what a small and late addition to the company of those who loved him, and whom we loved."21

When the obituary notice to "Charles Walter Stanyer Williams (1886-1945)" appeared May twenty-fourth in The Oxford Magazine: The poem first entitled "On the Death of Charles Williams" was first published in Britain To-day in August of 1945. Later Lewis changed the title to "To Charles Williams." It reads:

Your death blows a strange bugle call, friend, and all is hard
To see plainly or record truly. The new light imposes change.
Re-adjusts all a life-landscape as it thrusts down
its probe from the sky.
To create shadows, to reveal waters, to erect hills
and deepen glens.
To plant altars, I can't see the outlines.
It's a larger world
Than I once thought. It won't, caught in the bleak
air that blows on the ridge.
Is it the first sting of the great winter, the world-waning?
Or the cold of spring?

A hard question and worth talking a whole night on.
But with whom?
Of whom now can I ask guidance? With what friend
concerning your death.
Is it worthwhile to exchange thoughts unless--oh unless it were you?22
His death gained an added theological reality--it significantly altered the present world for those who remained behind. Reading Williams' very novels is akin to that experience--the impact becomes one of such an intensity that our very perspectives of reality are re-oriented.

Footnotes
5. Ibid., viii; Hadfield, Charles Williams, 164.
6. Hadfield, Charles Williams, 165.
7. C. S. Lewis, Essays, ix.
8. Hadfield, Charles Williams, 165.
11. C. S. Lewis, Essays, v, ix.
15. C. S. Lewis, Essays, v.
17. Lewis, Memoria, x.
20. C. S. Lewis, Essays, ix, xiv.