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INKLINGS, A KING, AND AN UNSURPRISING PRIZE: *THE INKLINGS AND KING ARTHUR*

JARED LOBDELL

THE INKLINGS AND KING ARTHUR: J. R. R. TOLKIEN, CHARLES WILLIAMS, C. S. LEWIS, AND OWEN BARFIELD ON THE MATTER OF BRITAIN, Sørina Higgins, ed. Berkeley CA: Apocryphile Press, 2018, ISBN 9781944769895, x + 555 pp., \$49.99.

THIS IS A HIGHLY IMPORTANT BOOK, AND INDEED a landmark in its field—even though the bounds of the field may be a bit indistinct. The subtitle here pretty exactly describes the intention and contents of the volume: the reasons I say the bounds of the field are not entirely clear are suggested by the specificity of the subtitle (“Inklings” here meaning Tolkien, Williams, Lewis and Barfield, and the subject being their connections more or less with the King specifically,

or at least his court—not with any other part of the Matter of Britain). They are similarly suggested by the first chapters of the book, “Introduction—Present and Past: The Inklings and King Arthur” (pretty much the same as the title); then “Inventory of Inklings Arthuriana,” and then, most wide-ranging (apparently): “Texts and Intertexts: The Matter of Logres: Arthuriana and the Inklings.”

The uncertainty as to the bounds and chronology of the “Inklings” is not uncommon these days—or, to be more accurate, there is increasing agreement that “the Inklings” does *not* refer—and certainly does not refer *only*—to the group to which Tolkien and Lewis gave the name, which met from sometime around 1932 till after World War II in Oxford. (Owen, by the way, told me he did not consider himself in any way a “full member” of that group.) Moreover, there is a subsidiary uncertainty here (or at least I detect one): are the terms “Arthuriana” and “King Arthur” and “The Matter of Logres” interchangeable—and by the way, how do they differ from “The Matter of Britain”—and where does Tristan fit in?

In the end these points may not be significant in judging the value of the book. Let me go back to its landmark status. It is, I believe, in part the cooperative effort of a growing assembly of (often younger) professional Tolkien (and Williams and Lewis—and Barfield) and Inklings scholars, some associated with Signum University, who often embrace a wide variety of current critical techniques, which is good. And the assembly seems to me to be a genuine fellowship (which is also good).

Here is a note from a recent blog from one of the contributors, showing what I take to be part of the major importance of the book: “Since the first call for chapters for *The Inklings and King Arthur*, this not-so-little book has been on its own adventure. Conference panels, keynote talks, digital round-table discussions, and crowd-sourced funding were all part of a long editorial and publication journey, shepherded all the way by editor Sørina Higgins” (Dickieson).

When Professor Higgins circulated her original CFP for the volume, after the publication of Tolkien’s *Fall of King Arthur*, I had nothing to contribute unfortunately—not even a blurb for the book. I am accordingly an independent agent, with no ties to the project, and can praise—as I do—from the outside. In the course of that praise let me note another—or two other—attributes of the suggested landmark status.

First, this is a professional fellowship, indeed almost a cooperative. The other day I mentioned to one of the scholars whose work is in this book my desire to put together a conference on *The Great Divorce* within easy traveling distance of my home between Lancaster and Harrisburg PA: he at once came up with a list of scholars who would be interested and even a Signum site within

moderately easy distance. And (with the crowd-sourced funding) there is what amounts to cooperative publication — though I could be wrong on that, not being part of the cooperative.

The key chapters—at least the key section of the book—are those already mentioned, the “Introduction,” the “Inventory,” and the “Intertexts” chapter. So let’s go over these, briefly. Here’s how Professor Higgins introduces her task: “The book begins, therefore, with a sizable section on questions of intertextuality: What is an ‘Arthurian text’? What constitutes the body of Arthurian work that preceded the Inklings? How do their writings interact with those of their predecessors and with each other?” (3). She continues:

Arthuriana is clearly a very broad category indeed; clever contortions might allow the whole body of work by all the Inklings into the present volume. In fact, the inquiry ‘What is an Arthurian work?’ was precisely the first question each of the chapters in this volume had to address. Each author had to ask him- or herself: In what ways were the Inklings interacting with materials that might be considered ‘Arthurian’? If some interaction with Arthuriana is discernable, what are the nature and significance of that interaction? Do these authors share the sensibilities of their times, or do they react against prevailing ideologies? How far are their ‘Arthurian’ works similar to one another, and in what ways do they differ? This, then, means that the current volume examines most of the Inklings’ *oeuvre*, asking of each text whether it takes up questions of kingship, statehood, empire, quest, conquest, consciousness, chivalry, and hierarchy in ways that are in fruitful relationship with an Arthurian past, present, and future. The result is a rich conversation among the various Inklings, between the Inklings and their culture, and between the Inklings and ourselves. (26-27)

(This concentration on “Arthuriana” occasionally serves the authors ill—particularly when some of Williams’s other novels besides *War in Heaven* might be useful and illustrative.)

Let us begin here with chapter one, “The Matter of Logres: Arthuriana and the Inklings,” wherein the editor defines terms and provides an overview of the adaptability of cultural appropriations of Arthur throughout his “palimpsestuous” history, then sets the stage for the chapters to follow by giving a brief summary of each of the major Inklings’ Arthuriana. Of particular note, she remarks (justly), is her discussion of Owen Barfield’s only thoroughly Arthurian work, *The Quest of the Sangreal*. Holly Ordway follows this with a brief history of the major medieval Arthurian texts. Her focus is “on the sources that are most widely recognized as influential or important and that are also significant in some way to the Inklings’ writings” (62), and she also notes that

“the Arthurian legendarium provided fruitful material for commentary on current events” (65). The nature of Arthuriana as a cultural gloss is a theme throughout the volume—though I think a couple of good bets may have been missed on the fringes.

Professor Higgins takes her Inklings in alphabetical order—Barfield, Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, looking at those of their works incorporating Arthurian themes or referents. Her discussion of Barfield’s *Quest of the Sangreal* is hampered by his prohibition on publication of the text other than by eurythmic performance. Evidence suggests that the text was assembled from Barfield’s notes and extracts from the 1934-35 *Everyman’s* edition of the *Morte*. The bar on publishing (other than by performing) the text of the *Quest* raises difficulties, but Professor Higgins does tell us that the excerpts from the *Everyman* (Caxton) *Morte* are of a part with the *Quest*. She also tells us that the *Quest* has both text and music (many eurhythmic productions have one or the other but not both).

When my then-fiancée and I had tea with Owen and Maud in 1974, I asked him a couple of questions about eurhythmy—was it, for example, anything like the swaying/dancing at Grateful Dead concerts? Were there set costumes? Set steps? (He asked me those same questions anent the concert dancing.) I also inquired whether there were both words and music? If the music supported the theme of the words associationally, I gathered there could be. His response here, including a smile at Maud, seemed to me to be related to an earlier question I had asked about any relation between eurhythmy and Morris dancing (both Owen and Maud were active Morris dancers at the time Rudolf Steiner spoke on eurhythmy in London in 1923). I got the same smile when I asked about costume.

My suggestion would have been that the *Quest* in some way was eurhythmically representing Britain or the matter of Britain, and that the music might be cognate to the Morris music (and the costumes?). One problem is, the chronology of its creation seems to be off (the creation being after 1934-35)—another is that we seem to be in the tale of the knights—Perceval, Lancelot, Galahad—which isn’t on its surface very British. To this I believe Barfield would have answered that the matter of knighthood was central to the Matter of Britain—but why Perceval, Lancelot, and Galahad? Why three? (I note by the way that these are the three in whom Williams seems particularly interested in the period in which Barfield is working on his *Quest*.)

On the three, recall the last Barfield pages of *The Great War*:¹³ the Whole must be divided into parts (by Will) for there to be action—and here Knighthood

¹³ See Barfield and Lewis, pp. 159ff, esp. p. 162.

is divided into three knights and there is not only the action of the text (and music) but the eurhythmic action.

Barfield's attention was attracted to parts of the Matter slightly different from (and arguably later in the cycle [?] than) Tolkien's more Germanic *Fall of Arthur* though that is at the end of Arthur's reign)—Barfield's other "Inklings" contribution (assuming his *Quest* is one) being *Mark v. Tristram* (1947 though not published till the '60s)—coming in part out of his "Poetic Diction and Legal Fiction" in the *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1947). This essay is not merely along the various lines laid out by Judge Posner in his study of "law and literature," but—being more about "law as fiction"—has in it some of Barfield's particular humorous consciousness, which comes out in *Mark v. Tristram*. Lewis's final letter, on the other hand, seems to me to be satire simply for satire's sake, or nonsense for nonsense's sake, in the Dysonian sense (or perhaps, it being CSL, simply parody for parody's sake) and not to have any serious point.

Professor Higgins's book was of course triggered by Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur*—written long before the existence even of Tangye Lean's Inklings, though of course Tolkien's second literary essay (attempt) in the Matter of Britain in alliterative form (after *Gawain and the Green Knight*). The discussion as one would expect, is well-informed and indeed well-researched. Here is part of her discussion:

Note, however, that all the Scyld/Shield/Sheave material I have been talking about was unpublished in Tolkien's lifetime. Most of it is in notes for projects he never finished, such as *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers*. Some of it, the material about *Beowulf*, he did discuss in his Oxford lectures on the poem, but he is unlikely to have made the connection with his own Valar explicit in that context. Therefore, this connection is not part of his official published works—the works that he himself completed and made public during his life—nor is it present in *The Silmarillion*.

This is also the case with Tolkien's Arthur-Eärendil connection: It is not part of the works he published during his lifetime—which brings me at last to *The Fall of Arthur*, Tolkien's only unequivocally Arthurian work. [...] Tolkien's notes reveal that, had he finished *The Fall of Arthur*, he planned to have Mordred mortally wound Arthur, Arthur kill Mordred, and Arthur be carried away to the West for healing. Lancelot, arriving too late, would set sail into the West, searching for his king, never to return. [...] In other words, had the poem been finished, Lancelot would have functioned somewhat like Eärendil, the mariner who used the Silmaril to sail into the Uttermost West and reach the Undying Lands. Both Lancelot and Eärendil sail into the West, seeking a lost paradise.

Tolkien tried to unite the westering legends about islands of the blest with Arthur and with his own elvish mythology in *The Fall of Arthur*. [...]

The *motif* of King Arthur going to Avalon, then, is seen again and again, subtly, throughout Tolkien's work, in the longings and journeys of many a mariner into the West.

I see one other possibly Arthurian resonance in Tolkien's *legendarium*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel tells Frodo that, with Celeborn, "together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat" [...]. *The Silmarillion*, the Histories of Middle-earth, and the other texts of the *legendarium* tell the tale of one long defeat: it is the cyclical story of 'one brief shining moment' always followed by disaster, war, horror, and fading. [...] This is comparable to the trajectory of many works of Arthuriana, especially in the twentieth century. (43-45)

Yes, and to many non-Arthurian works also. Of course, the point here is the Arthurian works, but occasionally I'm feeling as though the scope of inquiry is unduly circumscribed, and I'm not sure of the proper rules of engagement. Let's take the rules of engagement first. (For some reason Professor Higgins finds it necessary here to make use of a framework provided by Professor D. Thomas Hanks of Baylor, author of *The Social and Literary Context of Malory's Morte Arthure*. I'm really more interested in what Professor Higgins thinks about this than what Professor Hanks has said.)

Arthur (and, often, Merlin) establishes a righteous kingdom in Logres, but then it fades, fails, and is destroyed. 'In our time,' writes D. Thomas Hanks in an article on Malory and Tolkien, 'the upshot for Malory has been to convert his serious comedy of eucatastrophe to a reader's perception of tragedy, lost love, and lost life' [...]. I find a sense of inevitability in both story-complexes, but the fated nature of the defeat does not rob it of any of its poignancy. I read both the Arthurian legends and Tolkien's *legendarium* as heart-breaking tales of the long defeat that mortals fight here in this realm, always destined to enjoy new heroes in every generation, always fated to fail. (45)

Personally, I read them, first of all, as words, the kind of words spoken by or telling the tales of brave bright great figures of times long gone—there are, as Buchan has taught us, only a certain number of stories, and except for the occasional mythopoetic writers who create a new story-pattern (Haggard in *She* or Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* or perhaps closer to Tolkien, Fenimore Cooper in *The Last of the Mohicans*) the greatness and glory of the tales is in the telling.

As Hanks says, with intentional anachronism: ‘Malory has written a Tolkienian happy ending—but a happy ending which at the same time reminds one that along with eucatastrophe come tears and earthly loss’ (61). The Tolkienian kind of happy ending—whether of *Beowulf* or a fairy tale or an Arthurian retelling—includes fading, diminishment, and loss. Ye [sic], each of these tales is incorporated into his own totalizing, theological mythology, with its hope of a future eucatastrophe.

In short, Tolkien saw his elvish legendarium as the primary narrative, while Arthur was secondary. This is the opposite of Williams’ method, as Williams tried to draw everything else into his composite Byzantine Arthuriana. For Williams, at least by the end of his life, the Grail story was primary and all of his other ideas were secondary components of it. (45)

The distinction between Tolkien and Williams in their technique is real—but could we not say that Williams saw his Byzantium as primary, with Arthur and the others as secondary, while Tolkien sought to draw everything (even at the edge Roverandom) into his legendarium? (Or maybe they are much alike, though Tolkien is mostly the better prose-writer and Williams the greater poet).

The other two “Inklings” whose Arthurian productions are under central consideration in this book are Lewis (despite Professor Higgins’s [not inaccurate] extensions, pretty much *That Hideous Strength* and his parts of *Arthurian Torso*) and, of course, Williams. Williams’s “Inklings”-period Arthurian productions are *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) and “The Figure of Arthur” in *Arthurian Torso* (after his death), but it certainly would not be reasonable to expect the contributors to discuss only these, given the long history of Williams with Arthur.

Looking briefly at Professor Higgins on Lewis and Arthuriana, we find she has seconded much of the discussion of *That Hideous Strength* (with its argued intertextuality) to Brenton Dickieson (pp. 80-6 of his “Intertextuality” chapter). Here is what she says:

That Hideous Strength is a deeply intertextual novel. [...] Lewis brought into it elements from the writings of his friends Tolkien and Williams, as well as from older sources. [...] While [...] *That Hideous Strength* follows its own logic of coherence, it is true that there is a larger variety of intertextual procedures followed in this novel than in *Till We Have Faces*.

I propose that the greater intertextuality is due in part to the varied nature of the Arthurian material, discussed above. Once an author chooses to open the door to the Knights of the Round Table, it is hard to shut it again. Material from across a fifteen-hundred-year period could

come in, from Welsh, French, or German sources, bringing late Roman or high medieval or Victorian trappings with it—or Byzantine, if Charles Williams is one of the sources. Williams was a direct source for Lewis, as was Tolkien, which partially explains why conventions of Gothic horror jostle against the notion of an Elvish paradise in the West, and both with biblical materials and a modernist setting. (40)

Of course, unless we assume that the intended benefits of intertextuality in *THS* are to be reserved to the half dozen Inklings who might in 1945 have known the texts, the whole matter is a bit out of the way. In short, I think I differ—not on looking at or for “intertextuality”—one of the varied “modern” approaches I in fact find useful—and indeed in some cases very highly useful—but in its application here, *at least at the time THS was written*. Intertextuality is the shaping of a text’s meaning by or through another text. It includes techniques of allusion, quotation, calque, plagiarism, translation, pastiche and parody. It creates an ‘interrelationship between texts’ and generates related understanding in separate works. But the texts at the base of Lewis’s “intertextuality” in *THS* are either in the “MSS of my friend Professor J.R.R. Tolkien” or in Williams’s “The Figure of Arthur”—neither of them published (nor indeed finished) when Lewis finished *THS*. I think the “Arthurian” parts of *THS* are best understood as Lewis’s imaginative interior reconstruction of Robin Collingwood’s Arthur (in *Roman Britain*). (See discussion in my *Eight Children in Narnia*, referring to Collingwood’s distinction between chronicle and history. It might of course be argued that Lewis’s “intertextuality” involved *Roman Britain* much more than either Williams or Tolkien, at least in published works.)

Which brings us to Williams. Let me begin by quoting from Professor Higgins’s central chapter (pp. 29-60). First, “perhaps his greatest Arthurian innovation is the degree to which he made the Grail essential to the story and unified it with the tales of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table” (48). True. The Grail “must take the central place. Logres then must be meant for the Grail” (qtd. 48), Williams asserted. In his essay this volume, Andrew Stout concurs: “While earlier versions of the myths focused on Arthur’s kingship or the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere, Williams brought the quest for the Grail and its spiritual power to the forefront” (481). There had been other authors who had focused on the Grail to some degree, but comments throughout Williams’ Arthurian Commonplace Book and his prose study “The Figure of Arthur” reveal that he did not think any previous author had seen the essential spiritual unity—perhaps an occult unity— between those two halves of the narrative complex.

Higgins adds:

There are moments in the legends when Arthur comes very close to ‘the mystery’ of the Grail, but does not quite achieve it. In discussing *The High History of the Holy Grail*, Williams complains that this romance ‘does not entirely unite the Arthur theme and the Grail theme, and this is the more disappointing because it starts off as if it were going to do precisely that’ [...]. In an essay entitled ‘*The Morte darthur*,’ Lewis praises Williams’ *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* for their vitality, the centrality they give the Grail, and the inevitability of their concluding tragedy [...]. Williams has given the Arthurian world ‘a dynamic orientation toward a new spiritual centre’ [...]: the unification of all the elements of the vast, sprawling Matter of Britain in the object of the Grail. In these poems, the Holy Grail is a synecdoche for all objects and actions of Christ’s passion: ‘Almost any article connected with the Act served for its symbol,’ Williams wrote in “The Figure of Arthur” [...], meaning that any object associated with the Crucifixion could be used in commemorating it. Whether Williams himself finally achieved this poetic unity himself is a matter for debate. (48)

Indeed. Amen.

Here’s another passage summarizing Professor Higgins’s views (and remember, these are the views on which the whole book is built)—with which I find myself largely in agreement, unsurprisingly. I’ve been reading Williams for two-thirds of a century, at least, and I think I know him fairly well—though he was the one of these four “Inklings” with whom I had no personal contact (I was seven when he died).

In his prose study, Williams gives a literary history of King Arthur, then discusses his own contributions to the myth. He states ‘that the centre of the myth must be determined’ [...]—meaning that he had to determine what the center would be in his adaptation—and then immediately determines it: ‘The problem is simple—is the king to be there for the sake of the Grail or not?’ That is the center of Williams’ poetry: will characters serve themselves, or will they serve God and the kingdom, revealing this service by their submission to the Grail? As David Dodds wrote about *The Chapel of the Thorn*: ‘to use violence to secure a Hallow is to misuse your powers and to be improperly disposed toward It,’ and this is the case throughout Williams’ writings [...]. The Grail itself, and the characters’ attitudes and actions toward it, comprise ‘the central matter of the Matter of Britain,’ Williams boldly claims [...]. It is certainly the central theme of his life’s literary work.

This theme reveals itself over and over again through the cycle, as characters face moments of decision. In each case, they must decide whether to satisfy their own self-turned desires or to serve something larger than themselves. On the day of his crowning, Arthur 'stood to look on his city: / the king made for the kingdom, or the kingdom made for the king?' [...]. This is the question he asks himself on the first day of his rule: Will I serve the kingdom, or will I use the kingdom to serve me? (49-50)

Note that by restricting this set of inquiries to Arthuriana, we miss the deep-laid pattern that encompasses the Tarot cards and figures in *The Greater Trumps*, and the Stone of Solomon in *Many Dimensions*. Professor Higgins continues:

He answers the question wrongly, and this act of rebellion, of setting up himself against God (much like Satan's in *Paradise Lost*), is the first of many such decisions that cause the destruction of the Empire.

Many of Williams' characters make this fatal mistake. Members of the Court gather to partake of the Lord's Supper. Arthur and Lancelot are there among the others, but 'the king in the elevation beheld and loved himself crowned; / Lancelot's gaze at the Host found only a ghost of the Queen' [...]. Arthur and Lancelot look at the elements of the Lord's Supper, the bread and wine, but they do not discern the Body of Christ. Instead, each sees his own object of idolatry. Arthur sees himself; Lancelot sees Guinevere. They suffer greatly for their sin, but something immeasurably worse than personal grief also occurs: the very Kingdom of Logres is lost, and then follows the most dreadful catastrophe that could possibly befall the human race: 'Against the rule of the Emperor the indivisible / Empire was divided; therefore the Parousia suspended / its coming, and abode still in the land of the Trinity' [...]. The sins of Arthur and his kingdom have postponed the second coming of Christ! (50)

There is, naturally, much more to the book than Professor Higgins's work, and its bibliographic backup. There are five essays on Williams, three on Lewis, none on Barfield only, three on Tolkien, and a few (Charles Huttar's on Avalon most notable among them) looking at all four—though not, to be sure, at the "Inklings" as they understood themselves to be, or as (for example) Diana Pavlac Glyer (or Humphrey Carpenter) has understood them. After all, one of the earlier members wrote a longish narrative poem on one part of the Matter of Britain (Canon Fox on Coel Hen), and his discussion of his reason for choosing Coel casts some light on the "Inklings" and the Matter of Britain circa 1938.

And didn't Jack Bennett edit a volume of *Essays on Malory*? I remember it as containing "The finding of the manuscript" by Canon W.F. Oakeshott, who

found it, Lewis's essay on "The English prose *Morte*," the great Eugène Vinaver's "On art and nature," Lewis's pupil Derek Brewer's "'the hoole book,'" and papers on 'Chivalry in the *Morte*' (P.E. Tucker), "Lancelot's penance" (F. Whitehead), "Caxton and Malory" (Sally Shaw), and a "Bibliographical note" (R.T. Davies). I had to remind myself of the last four (though I remembered the "Caxton and Malory" piece but not the name of its author). The Vinaver and Brewer papers are useful in looking at Lewis's attitudes—as, obviously, is his.

This book makes the now almost-obligatory gestures in the direction of George MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton (both in the "Seven" at Wheaton, both with editors for the *Journal of Inklings Studies*), and that's arguably reasonable in context—but if the point is to look at the modern influence of Arthuriana (as suggested), it might be wise to look at T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*—and even if one is restricting oneself to more orthodox F&SF, what about [Joseph] Keith Laumer's *A Trace of Memory* (1953)? Laumer isn't comparable as an artist, but White (however on the other side of things) assuredly is. But of course Laumer wasn't an "Inkling" any more than White was. On the other hand, Laumer's Avallon [Vallon] is on another planet (like Lewis's earlier Abhalljin or Aphallin)—and, back to White, the passage beginning "the cannons of his adversary were thundering in the tattered morning" (631) places his *finale* in the same context as Tolkien's *Fall*—interesting, if no more. And then there is the last (unfinished) novel of the American Nobel laureate, John Steinbeck, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (published New York 1986, after Steinbeck's death, based on the Vinaver edition). This is particularly interesting as an attempt to get away from the Medievalism (so to speak) of Malory and put the story-pattern (*mythos*) in much more modern language (see Steinbeck's cover copy on the Avenel 1982 edition).

In any case (back to *The Inklings and King Arthur*), there is a chapter by Cameron Moore on Chesterton's Arthurian poems, and one by Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson on "Arthurian Peregrinations in George MacDonald." *Interesting*, I should say, though the Chesterton seems a trifle peripheral—after all, his Arthurian poems apparently weren't published in his lifetime and none of the "Inklings" of 1931-1963 could possibly have read them—and Chesterton was known not for Arthur and the Matter of Britain but for Alfred and what we might call the Matter of England; one point I would have been interested in seeing discussed is "Why Alfred and not Arthur?" It is not discussed here. (Would it have something to do with Chesterton's anti-Imperialism—or was Arthur really an Imperial figure?)

On the other hand,, it occurs to me that the author of the MacDonald chapter (pp. 615-434), Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson (it seems to me a first-rate presentation) might well have speculated on the degree to which MacDonald may have played a part in introducing Lewis to Arthur—and that reminds me

how the original meeting of Arthur and author could play a part in the author's eventual view of the King. MacDonald's American "agent," so to speak, was Mark Twain, who may very well have been introduced to King Arthur's Court by MacDonald—or made more fully acquainted with it. And we know Lewis came to Arthur partly through *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*—a satirist coming to King Arthur through satire.

In addition to the essays on the specific authors, there are a number of essays (five) dealing with certain Arthurian themes or *motifs* in (principally) Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams. The best of these is by the senior Inklings scholar in the book, Charles Huttar (who goes back almost as far as I do), on Avalon. There are no essays on Barfield *seule* (so to speak), but there are five on Williams, of which the one I find of greatest interest is Benjamin Utter on "Charles Williams and the Rhetoric of Empire." Let me say at the outset that Mr. Utter argues strongly (and convincingly) that in his late Arthurian poems, Williams is not a defender of "Imperialism" (as earlier Victorian Arthurianists may have understood it). *Kudos*.

Mr. Utter has read widely, worked hard, and thought these matters through and through—or so I should say. But—and here's the rub—poetry or even prose expressing Williams's highly idiosyncratic (and theological) Empire of Byzantium is scarcely the best place to look for Williams's attitudes toward Imperialism—as commonly understood in our postcolonial postmodernist age. Moreover, Mr. Utter's discussion of Williams's attitude toward Hitler seems to me fundamentally to be untethered to the realities of 1939-45 (and he ought perhaps to have looked at Williams on *The Forgiveness of Sins*). Also, it is taking quite a leap of faith to assume that what Williams in Oxford wrote to his wife in London is anything other than an attempt to make her feel included in his life—I doubt it has much direct evidentiary value as to what he actually was thinking.

What Mr. Utter is trying to find out is "[t]o what extent" Williams in *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* is seeking

a perpetuation of [the] tradition, in which Camelot's splendor serves as a powerful symbol for national self-mythologizing, the legitimization of empire, and religious triumphalism? [...] [R]eaders attuned to the politically freighted history of the Arthur myth cannot help but take note of the fact that Williams sketches this poetry across a landscape of empire, one representing an idealized Christendom, threatened both politically and spiritually by a rapacious Islamic Caliphate crouched on its eastern doorstep. Indeed, from one point of view, Williams' Arthuriad represents nearly everything that recent postcolonial criticism has undertaken to redress. (300)

He continues:

I suggest that it is important to acknowledge the ways in which even so highly metaphysical and symbolic a vision of the Arthurian myth as this relies on themes of Western order and imperial authority under threat from a doctrinally disordered foreign enemy, for by doing so we gain a greater appreciation for the effort of Williams' sympathetic imagination, or what he calls 'the feeling intellect,' to identify with the Other. (300)

He also notes that "Anti-fascist themes are important as well in the construction of Arthur's distinctly British heroism in the novel of English poet laureate John Masefield, *Badon Parchments*, written shortly after the Second World War" (300n2). But Williams followed Bridges not Masefield, and his cast of thought was unlike Masefield's.

Unfortunately (in my view), Mr. Utter goes on to say that

Distinguishing Williams from many other heirs to the Arthurian material, including Tolkien [this is where I think he's going astray], is that the 'difference' of the enemies of Logres is not a pretext for domination, eradication, or conversion by force, but rather for reflection on one's own sins. [...] [I]f his reductive use of Islam as a symbol of schism is in some ways troubling, it is also in the service of a searching critique of the individual Christian self and of the larger church body. If reading Williams' Arthur poems through the lens of postcolonial criticism serves to underscore both some of the darker elements at the heart of the Arthur myth [...] and Williams' own approving attitude toward hierarchical authority, an accompanying attention to the temper of his spiritual themes, expressed elsewhere in his theological writing, reveals a deep awareness of his own capacity for wrongdoing. [...] In the preface to his 1939 prose work *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*, Williams invites readers to consider Taliessin through Logres, in which 'the themes of this book are also discussed, from different points of view . . . ' [...]. Those who have taken Williams at his word have tended to regard his Arthur poems as apolitical, their incarnationalism excluding nationalism, so to speak. But the publication in 2002 of Williams' letters to his wife during the years of the second World War have revealed a side of the man quite at odds with the almost beatific persona he maintained among admiring friends and (it is not too much to say) disciples: one far darker and more anxious about the state of the war and the future of Europe. [...] I suggest that it calls into question as well the largely unchallenged assumption that Williams' Arthur poems, composed during the build-up to and height of (end 301)

the second World War, can be regarded merely as what Jan Curtis calls “a theology of physical beatitude in the language of dogma and myth [...].”

Thus, in *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*, the Arthurian pageant plays out over what Williams envisions as a vastly expanded Byzantine empire, set in conflict with both an encroaching nation of Islam and an imagined region called P’o-L’u, all overlaid—on the map Williams commissioned Lynton Lamb to draw for the flyleaf of the original edition of *Taliessin through Logres*—by a spiritually allegorical anatomy of a nude, reclining female body. (302)¹⁴

Let me note in passing that the comment on Tolkien’s using differences (from his men and elves presumably) as a pretext for domination, eradication, or conversion by force appears to me simply wrongheaded. Of what different species or tribes or whatever is Mr. Utter speaking? (I shall in fact ask him and we may have a fruitful conversation on the topic.) Meanwhile—back to Mr. Utter on Williams. The place of the “Inklings” in a world of postcolonial and anti-Imperialist criticism is an important question, with which Mr. Utter is (I believe) equipped to deal. But he seems to be unfairly limited in his scope of inquiry here by the required Arthurian *milieu*.

Certainly two of the popular British writers most influential on the Inklings are widely counted as Imperialists—Rider Haggard and John Buchan. Here let us look briefly at a recent summary (but highly original) work by the Australian-based historian of British Imperialism, Norman Etherington, *The Imperium of the Soul: The Political and Aesthetic Imagination of Edwardian Imperialists* (Manchester University Press 2017). This is the Imperialism most immediately relevant to Williams (or Tolkien or Lewis, both of whom read Haggard and Buchan avidly—Williams certainly read Haggard). The focal point in Williams’s fiction for his Imperial or Colonial (or postcolonial) attitudes is *Shadows of Ecstasy*, where the reference to Haggard is explicit. How did it happen that three writers of the WWI generation, who read Imperialist authors, were protected from Imperialism?

In the end, Haggard and Buchan were protected by their love of Africa—and both created great African characters, the Reverend John Laputa for Buchan, Umbopaq (I nearly said Inkamasi) for Haggard. Note that Buchan created (in *Salute to Adventurers*) a Native American hero, Shalah, and Tolkien, finding inspiration in Fenimore Cooper, made it possible for his forest guardian (Aragorn) to marry among the people of the forest (Arwen), while Cooper’s

¹⁴ When Buchan—in *The Lodge in the Wilderness* in 1906—considered the Emperor of Byzantium it was for his unlikeness to the British Empire, though an unfortunate unlikeness.

guardian (Natty Bumppo) must remain celibate—not marrying among his (Native American) people of the forest (see my forthcoming essay “From 1757 to the Third Age: *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Lord of the Rings*” intended for a *festschrift* for Richard West). And none of Professor Higgins’s (or Mr. Utter’s) “Inklings” are likely Imperialists. Williams was politically left of the others (see his recently published essay praising the Soviet Union), Tolkien was (like Henry Adams) a Conservative Christian Anarchist; Lewis was a schoolboy rebel (for most of his life), a parodist, a satirist, a wit. And Barfield? He had far more important things on his mind than politics. Now time to get back to the rest of the book.

There are three essays on Tolkien, all of interest, on Tolkien’s Guenevere (Alyssa House-Thomas), on *The Fall of Arthur* as a post-WWI text (Taylor Driggers; a popular topic after John Garth’s work), and on “The Elegiac Fantasy of Past Christendom in *The Fall of Arthur*” (Cory Grewell—that’s the one I’m least sure of). And there are three on Lewis, of which the most important is, I think, Brenton Dickieson’s “Mixed Metaphors and Hyperlinked Worlds: A Study of Intertextuality in C.S. Lewis’ Ransom Cycle.” The one I find a little specialized—for want of a better word—is Benjamin Shogren’s “Those Kings of Lewis’ Logres: Arthurian Figures as Lewisian Genders in *That Hideous Strength*”—and by the way, are there not seven genders, as seven gods, in *That Hideous Strength*? I’d like to see the authors tackle the question of describing or defining the seven classical genders—if I use a Jewish (cabbalistic?) six and extend the “hermaphroditic” by including a version where both parts are outward rather than inward-looking (Viritrilbian?), it still leaves me with inappropriate sixth and seventh, and is probably at best a detour on the way to an answer (if any).

And then there is “Lilacs Out of the Dead Land’: Narnia, The Waste Land, and the World Wars” by Jon Hooper, who links the three items of his title impressionistically, but seems to me to adopt too uncritically Lewis’s distaste for Eliot—on a par critically (I think) with his extremely bad review of Lord David Cecil’s *Oxford Book of Christian Verse*. His dislike of Lord David’s work may come from his anti-aristocratic bent; his dislike of Eliot reminds me of his comment to Arthur Greeves that it was a pity Nathaniel Hawthorne was a “bestly American.” Eliot was a friend of Williams, and of Barfield (when the poet Michael Ivens and I tried to get Owen on the Birthday Honors List one of our strongest supporters was Valerie Eliot). It didn’t seem to make a difference to Lewis. Oh well. (If one looks at the original [Oxford Lang & Lit or “Cave”] Inklings, Eliot was also a friend of Nevill Coghill and Lord David Cecil—and Hugo Dyson would have said, of Hugo Dyson.)

Professor Suzanne Bray’s essay, “‘Any Chalice of Consecrated Wine’: The Significance of the Holy Grail in Charles Williams’ *War in Heaven*,” is, I

think, excellent work—but except for Evelyn Underhill’s novel it’s material I was familiar with sixty and more years ago. Still more Andrew Stout’s “The Acts of Unity: The Eucharistic Theology of Charles Williams’ Arthurian Poems.” Malcolm Guite’s “Conclusion—Once and Future: The Inklings, Arthur, and Prophetic Insight” seems to me a fair evaluation of the book’s (and Professor Higgins’s) achievement—but as a reviewer I’m bothered by my feeling that a great deal of what is said on Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams—and particularly on Williams, where the Arthurian *motifs* are so strong—should surely be general knowledge by this time? I read the Ransom novels in 1951, Williams’s novels (and *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*) in 1951-52, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* not until 1954-55 (I read it because it was mentioned in *That Hideous Strength*).

I devoured the introductions by T.S. Eliot (to *All Hallows’ Eve*) and Bill Gresham (to *The Greater Trumps*) in the Pellegrini & Cudahy editions—and I read the *Arthurian Torso* before I read Tolkien. I even wrote for the girl I was dating (when I was 16 and 17) a Williams-ish sonnet (complete with Bors and Elayne and Williams-ish diction “before the turned worm had estranged flesh of one flesh”). And since Lewis and Williams were then my favorite authors, I wanted to know as much as I could about them. Perhaps some of what I learned in the early 1950s may have been forgotten in the intervening years, and we need it again, perhaps in new guises and new critical language. (I met Eliot two or three times, but I never asked him about Williams. I met Bill Gresham once, at the same New York City bookstore where I first saw *The Lord of the Rings* for sale. It is my impression that Gresham principally credited Williams for his conversion—his wife of course credited Lewis for hers—and theirs.)

There remains one question in the back of my mind. Tolkien’s Arthur in the *Fall* is not very like the Arthur of Chrétien or the *Morte* (Caxton’s or the Alliterative or the Stanzaic or . . .). Yet on one showing, *The Lord of the Rings* speaks to readers involved in the romances or the Fourteenth Century poems, or Caxton. When I joined the University of Wisconsin Tolkien Society in 1967-68, three of its most active members were Richard West (the founder) writing on the *Morte* under Vinaver, the late Carl Carroll, who taught Chrétien *et al.* out in Oregon for years until his death in 2016, and Deborah Webster [Rogers] who published also on the French poems if I recall rightly. I asked Professor Vinaver about Tolkien’s three-decker and its popularity. His response, if I recall it correctly, was that although *The Lord of the Rings* was a modern work, its author was by preference a resident in the medieval world, not the modern. But there is a clue in a rather impressionistic (1975) study of *The Celts* by the German filmmaker Gerhasrdt Herm, who argues that Arthur’s Court is quintessentially a final redaction of things Celtic—which might be expected to match in some way Professor Tolkien’s “fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic” (*Letters* #131, 144).

I recall mentioning to Professor Tolkien that a friend of mine had printed up a series of notepads headed “The Ad-Hoc Committee to Send the Twentieth Century Back to the Factory,” to which he responded, “No—nothing should be sent to any factory, and certainly not for repairs.”

It remains now to turn our attention briefly to the last part of the title of this review-essay. Professor Higgins managed to copyright the book (or its contents) in 2017, rather than 2018 (my review copy came off the press in January 2018), so the book was eligible for the Mythopoeic Society’s Inklings Scholarship Prize this year (for 2017)—for which virtually an entire community of scholars must have been rooting for it—and for which it was not only a worthy candidate but the best candidate. There may be a few topics in *The Inklings and King Arthur* where more work should be done, but my guess is they are in areas where the required Arthurian focus was limiting.

This has turned out to be quite a long review essay—but if you publish a book of (say) a third of a million words, you may expect the reviewer not to stint his. (And there was yet more I wanted to say.)

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JARED LOBDELL was the author of numerous books on literature, American history, and other subjects. His literary studies included *Eight Children in Narnia* (2016), *The Rise of Tolkienian Fantasy* (2005), *The Scientifiction Novels of C.S. Lewis* (2004), *The World of the Rings* (2004), and *England and Always: Tolkien’s World of the Rings* (1981). He passed away on March 22, 2019, as this issue was in preparation.

