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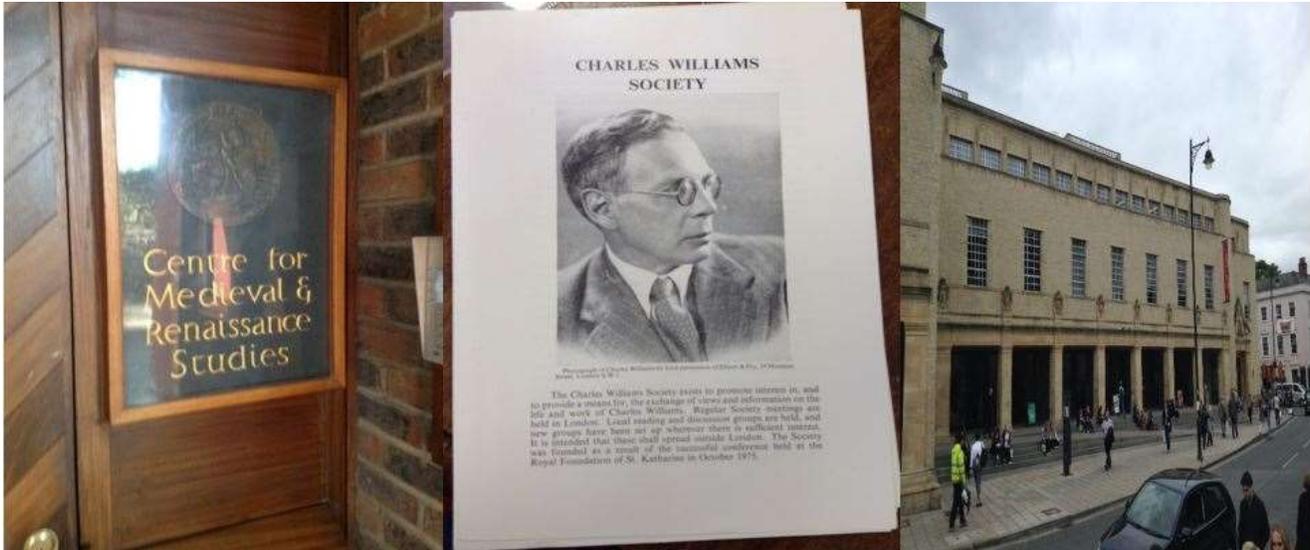
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“Eminently Combustible” -- Charles Williams, the Most Interesting Inking

By Clay Waters



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Primary Reader: Dr. Teresa Welsh

Introduction

“The whole man...was greater even than the sum of his works.” - Anne Ridler (Duriez, 2002, p. 220)

“A natural and pure originality marked everything that C.W. wrote...There is nothing worn or common or dull in any of his work, no padding, no borrowed thought.” - Alice Mary Hadfield (1959, p. 155)

“It is the whole work, not any one or several masterpieces, that we have to take into account in estimating the importance of the man. I think he was a man of unusual genius, and regard his work as important. But it has an importance of a kind not easy to explain.” - T.S. Eliot (Duriez, 2002, p. 221)

The English author and lay theologian Charles Williams was an idiosyncratic, intriguing, perhaps intimidating subject. He was born in St. Albans near London in September 1886 and died in Oxford in May 1945. In that relatively brief life, his prodigious literary output encompassed virtually every form imaginable (novels, poetry, theology, critical reviews, plays, masques, detective story reviews, even a single short story). Elizabeth Wright (1962) commented on his “versatility and quantity” when describing “the

size and scope of his published writings... Writing as he did in almost every form, he nevertheless maintained a consistency of theme that makes his work all of a piece...” (p.16).

There is also a more ephemeral aspect of his output that has evaded conventional libraries -- his rapturously received lectures on his driving passion, poetry. A strong Charles Williams’ collection exists in America, at the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College in Illinois. This paper, however, examines the contents of the two archival collections in his “home country” -- specifically the college town of Oxford, where he spent the last six years of his life in the company of the famous “Inklings,” the religiously themed writers C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. It will also assess the value of studying Williams in his own right, besides as a secondary figure in the lives of his more famous friends.

Williams was brought up in the Anglican Church, “and the rich liturgy of this tradition may have encouraged the love of myth and symbolism with which he was later to interpret it in fiction” (Wright, 1962, p. 15). The author’s working and writing life was spent almost wholly at the Oxford University Press in

London, which he joined in 1908 as a proofreader, eventually moving up to an editor position, all the while creating his own work (Cavaliero, 1980).

The Second World War forced Williams out of the London offices of Oxford University Press and into Oxford itself, where he joined the loose circle of The Inklings, centering around Lewis and Tolkien, who would meet in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College in Oxford to read their work in progress amongst themselves (Lindop, 2015). Those works and those names would eventually carry world renown. Williams also befriended the modernist poets T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, who credited Williams for his re-conversion to Christianity (Hein & Kilby, 1998, p. 138), and the mystery novelist Dorothy R. Sayers. He was a literary influence as well as a friend, and "...the members of the Oxford circle -- particularly Dorothy Sayers and C.S. Lewis -- are indebted to him, and his ideas may be graced in certain works of T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden" (Wright, 1962, p. 53).

In Glen Cavaliero's frank introduction to Williams's non-fiction history *Witchcraft*, he defended Williams's prodigious output, noting the author had "to supplement a slender income" while admitting he perhaps wrote more than was good for his reputation. "But it is a questionably aesthetic puritanism that looks down on prodigality; and Williams had a seriousness of concern, an imaginative integrity, which overrode the dangers of pot-boiling" (Cavaliero, 1980, p. vii).

Eliot himself offered this bit of backhanded praise after Williams's death while praising his work ethic, including a criticism of one of Williams's biographies. "Some of his books -- such as his *Life of Henry VII* -- were frankly pot-boilers; but he always boiled an honest pot" (Introduction to *All Hallows Eve*, 1945, p. xii). A note on terminology: "Pot-boiler" is defined by *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015) as a "derogatory term for a work written solely or mainly to earn money."

Whether Williams was a major genius or minor talent, he was certainly an original, both as man and writer, and an alchemy of odd views. Even the genre

he is purportedly most renowned for depends upon the personal taste of the commentator. The one thing he is not is a dull subject. Eternally contradictory, Williams seems to have been a down-to-earth esoteric, a mystic who never shirked grunt work at the Oxford University Press, constantly caught between two worlds, whether Earth and Heaven or London and Oxford.

For now, Williams basks in the reflected glory of his famous friends, clinging on to a secondary place in literary history among The Inklings. By evaluating the Williams archives in the United Kingdom, a clearer image may emerge of Williams as a subject of study in his own right, and an alternate path of research to the well-trodden ground of his famous friends.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to locate, explore, and document key primary and secondary resources related to the early-20th century British writer Charles Williams in collections based in the United Kingdom.

Research Questions

- R1. What sites in the United Kingdom have resources related to the writer Charles Williams?
- R2. How representative, revelatory, and accessible are their holdings related to Williams's extensive and varied *oeuvre*?

Importance of the Study

Author Charles Williams was rather popular in his own lifetime but is virtually forgotten today. He was not only a prodigious author in his own right but a behind-the-scenes influence on the work of his famous friends. Several possible explanations have been advanced for his relative obscurity. A post-war paper shortage made it hard to get any books into print. His widow, fearing the potentially embarrassing contents, would not approve of either a biography of Williams or the publishing of his voluminous correspondence (Lindop, 2015).

When in the company of Lewis and Tolkien, he is invariably awarded third place, the bronze medal as the "unjustly overlooked Inklings" (Higgins, 2011,

p.77). He is not consistently honored even in his own town. Oxford's famous Blackwell's Bookshop has an entire shelf of books by and about Tolkien, but contained nothing from Williams, although his name does make the brochure of the weekly literary tours run by the shop (onsite visit, June 21).

Perhaps it is the name "Charles Williams" itself that has held back his reputation. It is somewhat generic, not overly memorable, not like the sonorous names of his fellow "Inkling" friends C.S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien, or of the renowned modernist poet T.S. Eliot. Could his decline in esteem be the fault of the general decline of Christianity in Europe and Great Britain in particular? Yet that does not work as a reason. The work of Tolkien, Eliot, and Lewis have endured, while Williams remains an "Inkling" afterthought. Robert Peirano (2014) took a spiritual angle toward rehabilitating Williams in his theological biography *Under the Mercy*, calling Williams neither a major or minor writer, but in a category all his own, "reposing far beyond the traditional literary horizon's observable limit...The literary catalyst for this achievement is the Holy Grail" (Preface, para. 3).

A devout if not orthodox Christian, Williams was also sincerely interested in magic and the occult, and for at least ten years was a member of The Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, A.E. Waite's Christian offshoot of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Significantly, the Holy Grail was an essential symbol of the order. The Graal, or Grail (Williams used the Old French version of the word) would figure in his Arthur poems and his first published novel *War in Heaven* (1930). Williams was involved in occult practices and was fascinated with tarot cards and pentagrams. That may not be as odd as it seems now for a devout man, considering the rise of Spiritualism after the mass slaughter of World War I (Peirano, 2014).

Hadfield (1959) predicted, at a time of perceived religious renewal that the reputation of "C.W" (as she called him) would rise. She may have been unduly optimistic, as the Christian faith has since receded in the United Kingdom. But one does not need to share Williams' admittedly peculiar belief system to appreciate his fascinating novels or penetrating

lectures, or find his approach bracing and charming. Williams offers something for both the devout and the secular, for the reader and researcher alike.

Literature Review

Williams and The Inklings

Williams had a varied and prolific career and published work in virtually every form. However, he is perhaps best-known today for his affiliation in the loose Oxford-based literary society known informally as The Inklings. They met in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College in Oxford to read their work to each other. "J.R.R. Tolkien first tested his ideas for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and C.S. Lewis read aloud his *Chronicles of Narnia*" (Peirano, 2014, Chapter 1, para. 2).

C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien agreed, with affection, about their friend's sometimes maddening zest and quirky theological opinions, with Lewis writing "...just as some people at school...are eminently kickable, so Williams is eminently combustible," a reference to the burning of heretics (Lindop, 2015, p. 309).

The connection between Williams and those famous figures is genuine but perhaps overstated. He was only in Oxford for the last six years of his life. However, the connection does serve to nudge him onto the edges of the literary spotlight, if only to bask in the reflected glory of Tolkien and Lewis, and occasionally Eliot. As the director at Faber & Faber Publishing, Eliot published in 1937 perhaps Williams's best-regarded novel, *Descent into Hell* (Hiley, 2006). Lydia R. Browning (2011) emphasized the differences in approach among The Inklings' fictional works. Williams's work is less fantasy than magical realism, portraying only a thin barrier between this world and the next. In Tolkien's Middle-Earth, fantasy is wholly detached from our earth. In Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, characters can step through a closet and access another realm, while "Williams's world occupies the other polar extremity, where real and fantastical planes blend together in disturbingly seamless unity" (p. 72).

Novels by Charles Williams

Williams is perhaps best-known today for his novels -- his theological thrillers, or "spiritual shockers," in the phrase popularized by Lewis to describe them (a term actually suggested to Lewis by one Dr. R.W. Chapman (Lewis, 1947). After a late start in the field, Williams made up for lost time with a succession of five novels published between 1930-1933. *War in Heaven* (1930), his first published novel, came to print almost by accident. His kindness to Jo Harris, a junior typist at Oxford University Press, did not go unrewarded. He was about to throw out the manuscript (then unappetizingly titled *The Corpse*) when she commented that she had nothing to read over the weekend. She read it with enthusiasm and sent it on to a new publisher, Victor Gollancz, who published it in June 1930 (Lindop, 2015).

Sorina Higgins (2011) cites *War in Heaven's* opening "glorious sentence" which reads: "The telephone bell was ringing wildly, but without result since there was no one in the room but the corpse." She continued, "After this auspicious opening, the book unravels into a fantastic tale of the Holy Graal, black magic, and devil worship." One would be tempted to call Williams a proto-Dan Brown, with his flair for theological conspiracy tales.

Williams had a genuine enthusiasm and talent for the mystery genre, succeeding in combining "Gothic supernaturalism with elements of classic detective fiction," but not necessarily escapism. "Sayers, Chesterton, and P.D. James show the triumph of virtue, the important [sic] of reason, and the value of human life. But Williams does none of these things" (Higgins, 2011, p. 86). His characters think awful but orthodox thoughts about humanity, as Williams "lets the terror of theology run rampant, with the murder mystery itself pushed aside so that the deeper theological mysteries can take the fore." His work is deep in theological perception if sometimes overwritten (Wright, 1962, p. 16).

Williams's unique theological idea of "co-inherence" shines particularly in his later novel *Descent into Hell*, published in 1937. This idea of "co-inherence," or substitution of suffering, is taken from Paul in his

Letter to the Galatians: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2, English Standard Version). In *Descent*, the heroine Paulina is saved "by a concept uniquely developed by Williams, "the practice of substituted love," which "enables Paulina to take up the burden of fear once borne by an ancestor, who was martyred centuries before for his faith" (Wright, 1962, p. 24). The hero Peter Stanhope lectures her: "Haven't you heard it said that we ought to bear one another's burdens?" (Wright, 1962, p. 98).

Higgins' pick for Williams's best novel is *The Place of the Lion*, "perhaps the most extraordinary of all his novels" (2011, p. 22). Indicating everyone has a different angle on Williams, his biographer Grevel Lindop (2015) hints that *The Place of the Lion*, with its ancient archetypes and mysticism, has not aged well. Lindop favored *War in Heaven*, citing its "unforgettable opening sentence" and the plot involving a villainous antiquarian who has deduced the location of the Holy Grail in a modest English country church. It is revealing of how multi-faceted Williams writing was, that Higgins (2011) is most enthusiastic about his novels, while Wright (1962) favored his literary essays, and Hadfield (1959) wrote that upon his death in 1945, Williams's lectures were his most deserving claim to fame.

Detective Stories

Williams's first five novels were written in the early 1930s, a period in which he was reviewing detective fiction, and one now known as the "Golden Age of detective fiction" (Lobdell, 2003, p. 141). His underappreciated instinct and appreciation for the mystery story is evident in a collection of his newspaper reviews for *The Westminster Chronicle*, collated in *The Detective Fiction Reviews of Charles Williams 1930-1935*. Williams wrote about Agatha Christie's first Miss Marple novel, *Murder at the Vicarage*, in an October 14, 1930, review:

As for Christie, she ought to be a village scandal-monger -- she does it so well. But then (on the same grounds), she ought to be a vicar, and a vicar's young wife, and several other things. I rather hoped it was going to be a theological crime --

we have too few of them -- but the murdered churchwarden was a retired colonel not even interested in prophecy. The police are baffled; so is the vicar, and it takes the intelligence of a kind of worldly Mother Brown (If Mr. Chesterton will excuse me) to solve the mystery. (Williams, 1930, p. 42).

Williams would soon be filling that perceived gap with his own thrillers.

Poetry

Poetry was the form and subject Williams was most passionate about, but it took him time to find his own voice. In *Image of the City*, Ridler (1958) pointed out that Williams “was unusually late in finding a style that was truly his own, and that was suited to his purpose” (p. lvii).

Lindop (2015) documented Williams’s relatively hesitant aesthetic start in his first substantial collection of poetry, *The Silver Stair* (1912), consisting of 82 theology-themed sonnets. “Highly wrought in elaborate, old-world diction, the sonnets bristled with difficult ideas expressed in prickly and convoluted phrases.” He had become “a skillful writer of sonnets, but he lacked the poetic resources to express the complex ideas he wanted to convey.” Neither was his second collection, *Poems of Conformity*, a particular success: “...full of interesting ideas, it is very mixed in quality and has little internal coherence” (Lindop, 2015, p. 51).

Williams began writing Arthurian-themed poetry early in his career, and eventually “developed his own highly idiosyncratic take on the myth of Arthur in two cycles of poems, *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944)” (Hiley, 2006, p. 65).

With those two later works, Williams started “Miraculously, absurdly” to come into his own as a poet (Lindop, 2015). “It was not the Arthurian epic Williams had once dreamed of, but something better: a sequence of poems in an absolutely distinctive voice” (p. 239). Ridler (1958) also labeled *Taliessin...*

“the work by which he would have wished to be remembered” (p. lvii).

Here is a sample of Williams’s notoriously dense and “knotted language” (Hadfield, 1959, p. 154) from the first lines of the prelude from *Taliessin through Logres* (Williams, 1939):

*Recalcitrant tribes heard;
orthodox wisdom sprang in Caucasia and
Thule;
the glory of the Emperor stretched to the ends
of the world.* (p. 19)

Theology

C.S. Lewis (1945) describes Williams as a “romantic theologian.... not one who is romantic about theology but one who is theological about romance” (p. vi). It is hard to separate Williams’s theology from his fiction and poetry, but some of his theological essays advanced his unusual ideas. His non-fiction religious work *Descent of the Dove* (1939) is dedicated to the “Companions of the Co-inherence.” That is his name for his novel interpretation of the burden (or rather, the shared burdening) of the Christian life.

Williams’s personal thinking eschewed religious orthodoxy on the afterlife; his hell was not limited to “a postmortem realm distinct from earth as we know it” (Browning, 2012, p. 76). Some of his fictional creations actually experienced their own hell on earth, created of their own volition, for declining to share the burdens of their fellow travelers. That is what happened to Alexander Wentworth, the villain of *Descent into Hell* (1937). The last chilling lines:

*As he saw it there came on him a suspense;
he waited for something to happen. The
silence lasted; nothing happened. In that
pause, expectancy faded. Presently then the
shape went out and he was drawn, steadily,
everlastingly, inward and down through the
bottomless circles of the void.* (p. 218)

These are heterodox ideas, and a slightly defensive Cavaliero (1980) felt moved to defend Williams’ orthodoxy against accusations he was a “crypto-magician” (p. xv). Lindop (2015) followed the same vein in his review of *Witchcraft* (1941), a “vivid and

readable account of magic through the ages..." (Lindop, 2015, p. 331). He also raised the touchy question of whether Williams' idea of "substitution" was a form of magic.

Lectures

By contemporaneous accounts, Williams delivered fascinating poetry lectures both in London and at Oxford University. Hadfield (1959), who worked with him for six years, writes of his London lectures:

Words poured out of him! After a day's work, in a bare echoing schoolroom, under naked lights, confronting a handful of insignificant, half-educated people, some elderly, some with a dog, he would grip the desk, or fold his arms on it, and leap into words. (p. 59)

Lindop (2015) set the scene of Williams's first lectures in Oxford in January 1940: "Entering the sublimely beautiful fifteenth-century hall with its fan-vaulted roof of golden stone -- the University's oldest lecture room -- he found 'a reasonably large audience of undergraduates', mostly female" (p. 317). Young female admirers would figure heavily in his life and letters, though how far these relationships went is a matter of debate (Lindop documented some correspondence between Williams and his female acolytes in his 2004 biography).

Eliot (1945) described Williams at the lectern in his introduction to Williams's last novel *All Hallows Eve*, breaking all the rules of a traditional speaker -- jingling coins in his pocket, swinging his leg -- but getting away with it through his intensity and odd charisma: "...he held his audience in rapt attention, and left with them the contagion of his own enthusiastic curiosity" (p. xii).

Plays and Masques

Lindop (2015) describes a masque as a "Renaissance court entertainment, with aristocratic actors playing versions of themselves in a moral or allegorical setting with music and spectacular costumes" (p. 132). Williams, a man out of time, wrote in this anachronistic form for his employer, Oxford University Press. Performed at the offices, they were

packed with inside references and inside jokes, with office personalities on distorted display.

Judgment at Chelmsford is a (relatively) more traditional work by Williams, a "pageant play" he wrote for a London church in 1939. It was meant to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Diocese of Chelmsford, but the Second World War prevented its production. The play consisted of eight episodes telling the history of the Diocese. From the synopsis in the Prologue, "Chelmsford, on her birthday, comes to the gate of heaven to talk with her elder brothers, the Great Sees of Christendom. There are five of these -- Canterbury, Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem, representing the chief bishoprics of the Universal Church" (p. 4).

The ending features the slightly blasphemous image of a female crucifixion, or at least the image of Chelmsford "leaning happily on the cross" (Williams, 1939, p. 91). Lindop (2015) made a connection, "Here and there Williams's private fantasies emerge. The pageant's climax, where the young woman representing Chelmsford is bound to a cross, illustrated how complex were the links between his erotic imaginings and his mystical theology" (p. 294).

Short story

Williams published only one short story, as far as is known. "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" ("And May They Be Forever Damned") (1939) was discovered and read on Project Gutenberg, the digital and archival e-book project for material in the public domain. It is a chilling theological ghost story that dovetails with Williams' revealed personal theology, as Lord Arglay's innocent walk along a country road leads him to the verge of his own personal hell before he saves himself by helping another lost soul ("co-inherence" in action). The story was first published in 1935 in *The London Mercury*.

Biographies by Williams

As previously noted, T.S. Eliot in his introduction to *All Hallows Eve* (1945) damned Williams's biographies with faint praise regarding his friend always boiling an "honest pot." Lindop (2015) bluntly states "Williams was not a good biographer. He had neither

time nor skill for research into original sources....” He did make an exception for Williams’s book on Queen Elizabeth, which “at 186 pages, is quite a good read, whereas the other biographies, twice the length, are at times so mannered as to be almost incomprehensible” (p. 206).

From these varying takes, it is clear Williams’s work was impressive in scope, from a man who perhaps wrote too much for the good of his reputation. His novels are praised for originality, and he eventually found a voice for his “Long-standing Arthurian vision” (Lindop, 2015, p. 229) and translated it into great poetry late in his sadly truncated literary career.

Charles Williams’s Death

The end of Williams’s truncated life is perhaps best remembered through the reminiscences of his friends. Eliot (1945) describes the day in May 1945 when he learned Williams “had died in hospital in Oxford the day before, after an operation which had not been expected to be critical” (p. x). In a memorial broadcast in 1946, Eliot said of Williams: "He seemed to me to approximate, more nearly than any man I have ever known familiarly, to the saint" (Ridler, 1958, p. xxviii).

In *Arthurian Torso* (Williams & Lewis, 1948), C.S. Lewis wrote this poignant sketch of Williams reading from his unfinished history of the Arthur saga:

Picture to yourself, then, an upstairs sitting-room with windows looking north into the ‘grove’ of Magdalen College on a sunshiny Monday Morning in vacation at about ten o’clock. The Professor and I, both on the chesterfield, lit our pipes and stretched out our legs. Williams in the arm-chair opposite to use threw his cigarette into the grave, took up a pile of the extremely small, loose sheets on which he habitually wrote -- they came, I think, from a twopenny pad for memoranda, and began as follows... (p. 185)

Methodology

An Internet search revealed the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Oxford as the official home of the archive of the (now defunct) Charles

Williams Society. Lindop’s comprehensive biography of Williams, *The Third Inkling* (2015), also credited a trove of Williams’s material at the Bodleian Library of Oxford University, the existence of which is not revealed via an Internet search or even a catalog search of The Bodleian itself.

Besides Lindop’s 2015 biography, other sources consulted for the literature review were the database *ProQuest Literature Online*, the online union library catalog *WorldCat*, and the University of Alabama scholarly database, *SCOUT*. On-site in London, the main source for the literature review was the British Library catalog and Reading Room. Using Lindop (2015) as a guide, a representative list of works both by and about Williams was gathered. The British Library’s online catalog was accessed to see which of his works, if any, were available for access. In most cases they were, save the biographies. From there, a representative sample of works, mostly published editions of books and plays (first editions when available), were reserved remotely via the British Library’s online catalog. After the acquisition of a temporary readers card, those items were accessed during several visits to the Humanities Reading Room of the British Library in London.

The two Williams’s repositories in Oxford were accessed on two separate trips to Oxford. Access to The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies simply required an introductory email, while the more formal arrangement of The Weston Library at The Bodleian at Oxford University required an introductory interview. Staff at each archive asked that requests for specific materials be made in advance. This was done, and the desired material was accessible upon arrival. (Requests from The Centre included a wide range of forms, while requests for The Weston focused on rarer items like lecture transcripts.) Both archives were efficient and helpful in the provision of primary and secondary materials (and in one case, coffee and biscuits). The taking of notes in pencil and taking of non-flash photographs were permitted, in order to collect descriptions of the material and provide content analysis.

Results

R1. What sites in the United Kingdom have resources related to the writer Charles Williams? The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Oxford

The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CMRS) in Oxford

For 10 years, the Centre has housed the official archive of The Charles Williams Society, and the group put together the comprehensive if arcane online catalog, which is housed on the static website for the Society (Paul Monod, personal communication, July 11). The Centre is open for four hours a day, five days a week, and its cataloged holdings are divided into “books” and “papers.”

The “books” section itself is divided into two main parts; primary works by Williams, such as his myriad novels, poetry, and works of criticism and theology; books that are about Williams, either directly or indirectly. The “papers” include typescripts, and business correspondence (some original, some photocopies), as well as manuscripts by both Williams and his colleagues, all related in some way to Williams’s published work. The online catalogs indicate that the Centre contains ephemeral items not found elsewhere, as well as his more obscure published works, like his biographies (The Charles Williams Society, n.d.).

The Weston Library in Oxford

Preliminary guidance regarding the Williams’s collection at The Weston Library at The Bodleian at Oxford University was provided by a library staffer, via email, in the form of a 21-page PDF file, dated 2009, of uncatalogued material. A briefer list of cataloged material was pasted into the email. The trove as listed included manuscripts in Williams’s hand, such as early versions of published poems, as well as typescripts of his plays, lectures, even sermons. The uncatalogued list of materials is divided by donor, including Williams’s friends and colleagues like Alice Mary Hadfield and Anne Ridler, as well as correspondence (marked as restricted access) with colleague Phyllis Jones.

The list of cataloged material (all from a single acquisition by Ursula Grundy) indicated a mix of lecture transcripts and hand-written lecture notes, typed versions of Williams’s poems, and other miscellany. The Weston Library appeared to have a particularly strong collection of Williams’s letters, handwritten manuscripts, and transcriptions of lectures, which Williams delivered both in London and Oxford and which may not exist in standard libraries.

R2. How representative, revelatory, and accessible holdings are related to Williams’s extensive and varied oeuvre?

The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CMRS) in Oxford

The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CMRS) proved to be rich in ephemeral-type items related to Williams. Some of these fragile items, like the artwork for books, were stored together in sturdy cardboard boxes, encased separately inside in plastic bags. The examined contents were all in good condition. Some representative items from this repository included a transcript of a lecture on “Byron and Byronism” delivered by Williams at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1938. It featured a praiseworthy introduction by one Monsieur Desclos, honoring Williams for going beyond the mere “presentation of factual information... the vain paraphernalia of scholarship” to find “sources of beauty for those who have eyes to see and the soul to feel” (Desclos, 1938).

The CMRS archive also contained an uncollected play, not performed until 1996, listed as “*Frontiers of Hell - A Play in 3 Acts* by Charles Williams, written for the Oxford Pilgrim Players in 1941, but never performed.” A skim of the text suggests it is magic realism of a sort, set in an alternative world where witches are burned in a modern-day public square. The villainous Oliver Smetham delivers a sulfuric echo of The Lord’s Prayer near the beginning regarding Lucifer’s fall from grace: “Our father, who was in heaven.” There is witchcraft, and a planned sacrifice of a girl on the night of the summer solstice (Williams, 1941).

Both the beginning and the end of The Charles Williams Society were documented in the archive. A four-page publicity brochure (Edward Fox & Son Ltd., 1977) informed interested parties that “The Society was founded as a result of the successful conference held at the Royal Foundation of St. Katharine in October 1975.” The archive also contained a copy of the *Journal of Inklings Studies*, with an insert featuring chairman Brian Horne announcing the shuttering of The Charles Williams Society newsletter the *Quarterly* and the closing of the Society (2013, October).

The Centre also carried *Queen Elizabeth* (1936), one of Williams’s hard-to-find biographies, which not even the British Library seems to hold. One might see where the charge of overwriting arises, in the last paragraph: “Unassassinated and undeposed, untheological in an age of theologies, uncertain in a world of certainties, turning upon some hidden centre of her own, faithful to some dark belief of her own, and else as incalculable in her actions as unforeseen in her existence....” (Williams, 1936, p. 141).

A typed copy of the newsletter featured a fascinating recollection by Anne Scott, “Charles Williams As I Knew Him,” described how she heard him talk on the subject of “The Image of the City in English Verse”:

He would be almost shouting one minute, almost whispering the next, and when he quoted passages of poetry, which he did with every other sentence, he marked the metre and rhythm so strongly that he chanted rather than spoke. But in spite of all this, it was quite obvious that he was neither affected not speaking for effect. He was not in the least interested in the impression that he made, but he was passionately interested in what he was saying. And what he was saying was not in the least like anything I had ever heard before. To listen to him was like finding oneself in a place where everything was a

different colour and shape and size, and lit by a different light. I came away from the talk quite certain that the only thing I wanted to do was to listen to him again. (Scott, 1976, p. 6)

Perhaps the most poignant item, one hard or impossible to discover anywhere else, was an article in an old copy of the *St. Albans Review*, a newspaper from Williams’s place of birth St. Albans, “Forgotten author’s home soon to be demolished” (Figure 1). Geoff Dunk, using Hadfield’s biography of Williams as a source, noted that “...in St Albans, his books gather dust in the library storeroom and the forgotten author’s home is about to be torn down” (1982, p. 2).



Figure 1. St. Albans Review, November 18, 1982 (photo by Clay Waters, 2017)

The Centre’s strong secondary archives revealed connections between various Williams’s admirers. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Grevel Lindop (2004) reviewed Lobdell’s collection of Williams’s detective novel reviews, under the title “The Third man -- Charles Williams: An Occult Figure of the 1930s.” (The piece was advertised on the newspaper’s cover as “Tolkien’s Tarot,” further underlining Williams’s tertiary reputation among The Inklings.) Lindop (2004) concluded that “An author who, in 1945, could

write with equal conviction about telephone sex and the practical difficulties of finding oneself dead deserves renewed attention” (p. 21). Lindop would dutifully provide that attention a decade later in his 2015 biography of Williams.

Also helpful was the book *Charles W.S. Williams - A Checklist* by Lois Glenn (1975), which quantified Williams’s impressive output, and whose separation of his work into various divisions was used by the Society to put together its online catalog (The Charles Williams Society, n.d.). Glenn officially confirmed the existence (p. 13) of Williams’s short story, “*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*,” not contained in the CMRS archive, which indeed appeared in the *London Mercury* No. 33 in December 1935, on pages 151-158.

Also found in the CMRS archive was a typed sheet, headed “Items Acquired Since the Compilation of the Catalog,” listing a few stray items which, together with the official online catalog, formed a reasonably complete inventory of the Williams-related items in the archive.

The Weston Library in Oxford

Oxford University’s collection of Williams’ papers were accessed in the Bodleian Rare Books and Manuscripts Reading Room at The Weston Library. The Charles Williams’ archives consist of seven boxes of mostly uncatalogued material, including loose-leaf manuscripts, typescripts, carbon copies, and some personal effects of Williams, like cherished books. Each collection of items was kept in reinforced manila folders, and each folder was marked with details of its contents in pencil, including a request that readers keep the papers in proper order. The archive also included correspondence, some restricted, from Williams to his friends. There was also a single box of cataloged material, consisting mainly of leaves of manuscript, sealed individually into protective, oversized blue folders bound with string. The examined contents were all in good condition.

Several transcripts of Williams’ lectures revealed his strong but generous opinions of figures in literary history, including undated typescripts of lectures on

the poets William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats. These were donated to The Bodleian by Mrs. Anne Scott (who wrote in The Charles Williams Society newsletter of being awe-struck by a Williams’ lecture). In one lecture, “Coleridge, Shelley, and the Lesser Images,” Williams argued for the overall superiority of Coleridge as a poet.

There is perhaps no English poet whose unimportant verse is so difficult to read as Coleridge’s; even Keats’s is more exciting and Wordsworth’s is poetry compared to it...let us note that Coleridge had a larger scope than any of the other Romantics. His power was spasmodic throughout, but it is thorough. He could rival the others on their own ground; they could not enter on his seas. (Williams, ca. 1940-1942)

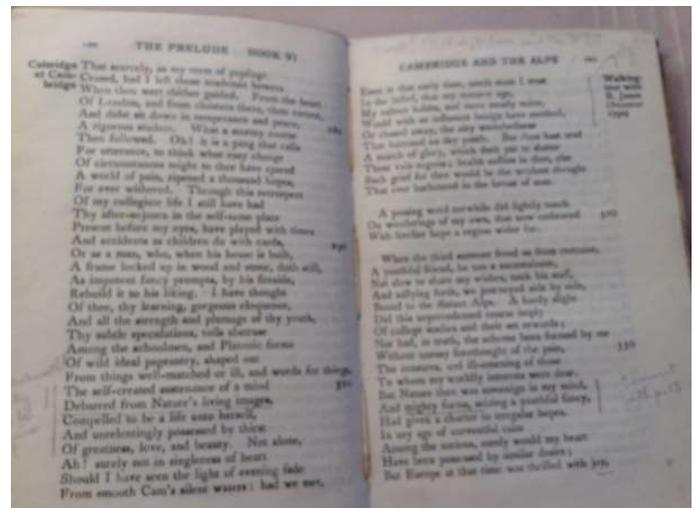


Figure 2. Charles Williams’ copy of William Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, with marginalia (photo by Clay Waters, 2017).

The repository also contains Williams’s personal copy of William Wordsworth’s poetry collection *The Prelude* (1850), a work he much admired (Figure 2). It includes marginalia on most pages, presumably from Williams. This included an outburst around Line 325, in which Wordsworth ponders whether, if he had met his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge sooner, Wordsworth himself may have “chased away the airy wretchedness/That battened on thy youth” [Wordsworth, 1850/1928]. Williams exclaimed in the margin, “Golly!”

Another find was a marked-up original typescript of “Letters in Hell,” Williams’s affectionate review of his friend C.S. Lewis’s epistolary novel *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), a review that would eventually appear in the magazine *Time & Tide* (March 21, 1942). Williams’s review was written in the style of a Screwtape letter to “Scorpuscle” from “Snigsnozzle.” In the draft, the humorous tribute name Williams originally chose for himself, “Egosezle,” has been crossed out and replaced with the one that made it to print, “Snigsnozzle” (Figure 3). A transcript typed in blue ink and annotated by Williams of “The Canonisation of the Heathen,” an address he delivered in Oxford on January 25, 1942, contained interesting thoughts about said “heathen.” It is, I think, true to say that in some sense the heathen are necessary to the Church -- at any rate to the Church as it now exists on earth...first -- they provide us with a certain clarity of intellectual opposition which is extremely healthy for us (p. 2).

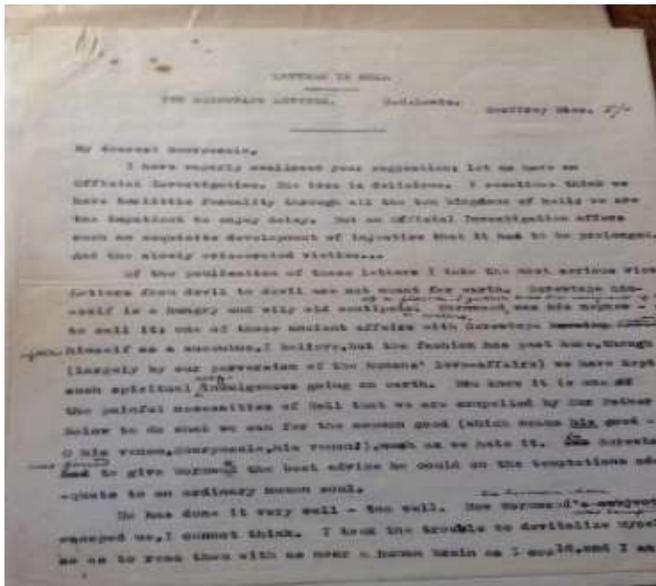


Figure 3. Typescript of Charles Williams’s Review of *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis (photo by Clay Waters, 2017)

Conclusion

The two Oxford resources, although not the easiest to access, were efficiently organized and more than sufficient for the purpose of Williams’s scholarship. The material in both archives, including hard-to-

classify ephemera and one-of-a-kind items, were adequately accessible in sturdy boxes and folders. Perhaps digitizing some of the more frail and delicate items could be put on a future agenda. Each Oxford archive was sufficient in itself for researchers wanting insight into the life and work of Charles Williams. The proof is in Lindop’s 2015 book - his acknowledgments cite the Society’s repository as well as that of The Bodleian, the latter mostly for the correspondence involving Williams. There was inevitable overlap between the collections but also differing emphases, such as The Bodleian’s strengths in Williams’ lectures, and CMRS’s cache of obscure newspaper articles. The Weston Library divided the materials into cataloged and uncataloged items, but in practice that was a distinction without a difference; both sets of disparate items in the Weston archives were organized as well as could be expected.

The archives at CMRS were well-cared for, neatly arranged, and quickly accessible. The online catalogs were robust and virtually complete. The limited hours for CMRS could pose a problem for researchers with time constraints, but the staff of the quiet space were helpful and inviting.

Overall, The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CMRS) may have housed more contemporary accounts and ephemera, such as newspapers, book covers, and pamphlets, while The Weston Library contained more of Williams’s primary material, such as correspondence and original manuscripts. Any Williams’s researcher will find their most arcane and obscure wish list met between the two Oxford-based archives. In particular, the breakdown of the CMRS online catalog by genre was helpful. The sheer scope of the items available in each archive demonstrates the robust variety of Williams’s career among many forms and genres, bolstering his reputation as an original thinker and a writer of all trades.

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