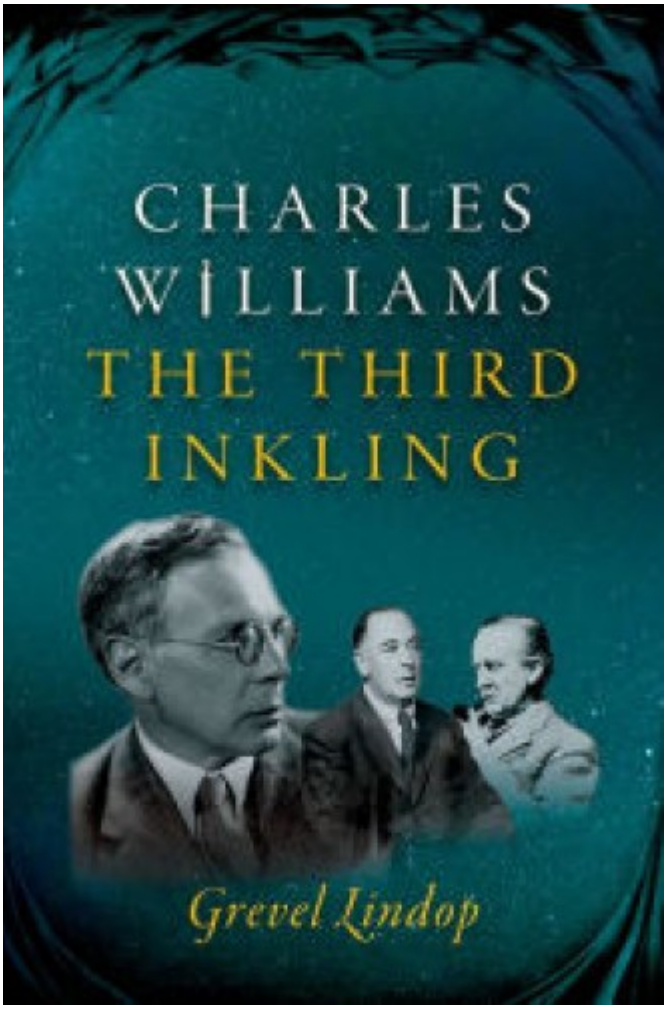
Shadows of a saint

by Philip Jenkins in the May 25, 2016 issue

## In Review




### Charles Williams

By Grevel Lindop
Oxford University Press

In 1963, W. H. Auden reported his weary experiences on a lucrative U.S. lecture tour in the wry poem “On the Circuit.” It was grim maintaining a smiling face while meeting so many gushing strangers, but occasionally there was “a blessed

encounter, full of joy . . . With, here, an addict of Tolkien / There, a Charles Williams fan.” The number of devotees of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis proliferated enormously over the following decades, and that boundless enthusiasm spilled over to any and all of their associates, including Williams. A rising tide lifted all Inklings.

Many contemporaries regarded Williams (1886–1945) as an unalloyed genius and polymath. He was at once theologian, mystic, poet, novelist, editor, playwright, and critic, not to mention being an esteemed spiritual mentor and (possibly) a living Anglican saint. Lewis was deeply influenced by him to the point that the figure of Aslan in the Narnia Chronicles was borrowed intact from the angelic archetypal figure of Williams’s novel *The Place of the Lion*. Meanwhile, Lewis’s novel *That Hideous Strength* is often regarded as more Williams’s work than Lewis’s. Some of us would quibble about relegating Williams to the rank of merely third among Inklings.

T. S. Eliot also fell under his spell. The better you know Williams’s all too seldom read dramas, the more startled you might be at the numerous clear echoes of his work throughout *Four Quartets*. Auden himself said he owed his Christian conversion in part to contact with Williams.

Many other far lesser figures, including the present reviewer, attribute their own original religious commitment to the overwhelming power of Williams’s writings. It helps, in my case, to imagine the years around 1970, when interest in spirituality of all kinds was running very high and all manner of options were on the table—the occult and kabbalism, neopaganism and Arthurian mythology. For many of us, at least in Britain, Christianity was nowhere near being a serious option. Perhaps unfairly, it seemed at the time as if the mainstream churches were irretrievably lost in the Secular City.

Imagine discovering in that context a figure like Williams, a titanic figure quite on a par with the greatest church fathers. Like them, he had no hesitation about drawing on any aspect of secular or even esoteric learning and absorbing those ideas fully into his own enthralling Christian synthesis. The Grail, the Tarot, the magical Seal of Solomon, the Platonic archetypes—all became part of Williams’s audacious *praeparatio evangelica*. All supplied themes for novels, and all were duly inducted into his overarching Christian mythology.

Although that mythology used distinctive language, it offered core Christian doctrines. Williams preached about doctrines of substitution and co-inherence. Despite their abstruse titles, the doctrines are straightforward enough: they are about believers sharing each other's lives and bearing each other's sins and burdens. What makes Williams's approach to these topics radically different is that he sees these mutual gifts extending across time and space, so that a woman in the 1940s can take to herself the fears of a man facing martyrdom in the 16th century ( *Descent into Hell*), or a murdered native girl can, after her death, save the soul of the missionary who scorned and condemned her (*House of the Octopus*). For Williams, God was never bound by human perceptions of time, causation, and chronological sequence. Nor was the communion of saints.

In *Descent of the Dove*, Williams offered nothing less than a history of the Holy Spirit in the church. He told the story of evolving Christendom through the competing understandings of images and symbols, either in affirmation (the liturgical and sacramental vision) or negation (mystical and Puritan).

Suddenly, for me, Christianity made thorough sense as a comprehensive spiritual and historical tradition, and as the saying goes, I have never looked back. Unpacking Williams's ideas took some decades more, and I am far from sure that I have done so fully even yet.

It was around 1970 that I encountered what is admittedly his weakest novel, *Shadows of Ecstasy*, in which the peoples of Africa are inspired to invade a spiritually desolate Europe. As their manifesto declares, "the prophets of Africa have seen that mankind must advance in the future by paths which the white people have neglected and to ends which they have not understood." Someday, I thought, it might be intriguing to write something on that topic of a coming next Christendom.

Clearly, Williams's ideas were (and are) not for every taste, and what attracts one reader might appall another. Tolkien sometimes found less than met the eye in Williams's vaunted intellect and poetic aspirations and wondered if he might be a charlatan. He thought Williams had ruined *That Hideous Strength*.

More serious for some Christians are concerns about the content of Williams's occult and esoteric learning, about which we have learned so much more in recent years. Contrary to myth, Williams was never a member of the legendary Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the ultimate source of most modern-day occult thought and

experimentation. In fact, that group had fallen apart amidst bloody recriminations while he was still in his teens. Williams was, though, a member of various successor sects that pursued ritual magic and kabbalistic research, including the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross.

Until his death, he remained a magician as much as a Christian visionary, even if he never found the least contradiction between the roles. For some years, the official rank that Williams held within the fellowship was *Proclamator et Lucifer*. The latter word is to be taken in the sense of light-bearer and illuminator rather than Satan, but it lends itself to misinterpretation. In the 1990s, at the height of panic in the United States over Satanism and cults, it was bizarre to find Williams's explicitly magical novels readily available in evangelical Christian bookstores, which normally regarded such interests as the devil's wiles.

Modern biographers have been still more troubled by Williams's curious (to say the least) relationship with many young women. If those interactions never extended to harassment or abuse, he often resembled a Svengali figure, with a taste for mild sadomasochism. Central to his spiritual vision was the idea of the Company or Order, the intimate circle of friends and fellow believers who represented in miniature both Christ's kingdom and the communion of saints, not to mention the Arthurian knights. A hostile critic could easily have termed it a cult, with Williams as guru.

At various times, Williams's office at Oxford University Press contained the ritual sword essential for his work as an occult magus, as well as light bondage paraphernalia. Had he been a professor at a modern-day American or British university, his career would have lasted only a few days.

If only because of his influence on multiple figures in modern literature and religious thought, Williams's significance is beyond doubt, although his role often seems paradoxical. Grevel Lindop is to be thanked for a biography that is not just superbly researched and written but is also prepared to explore all the enigmas and contradictions, frankly yet sensitively. I stand in awe of the documentary materials that Lindop has unearthed, not to mention the breadth of the interviews and personal contacts. Beyond giving Williams all due credit for his own contributions, this definitive biography is immensely informative about many other figures, including the Inklings circle itself.

In some biographies, accounts of a subject's early years can be of limited interest, as the reader wishes to hurry on to the years of achievement and recognition. In Williams's case, the early background is vitally important as it differs so starkly from the upper-class world of great houses and leafy rectories in which so many British authors moved. Crucial to understanding Williams is that he was a working-class boy from a London background that verged on penury, so that he could not aspire to graduate from any university, let alone frequent the exalted halls of Oxford or Cambridge. His stunning erudition largely derived from self-teaching.

Williams's position in the literary world, moreover, was in no sense part of a conventional ascent up the academic ladder. Rather, he took a menial job in the publishing world and somehow rose to the rank of editor at the Oxford press. Only during the exceptional conditions of 1940 did Oxford University grant him a lecturing position, obtained through Lewis's "smuggling" him into the post. That Oxford residence permitted him to join the group that we remember as the Inklings.

In a society so resolutely founded on class nuance and shared assumptions about class and education, Williams was always a rank outsider, and that was reflected in the working-class accent which he never lost. Yet if that status meant that some kept him at arm's length, it also allowed him to explore any intellectual avenue that he chose, however unconventional. Like Lewis and Tolkien in their very different ways, he created his own universe.

A relatively small portion of this book actually covers the familiar episodes and characters of the Inklings years, but Lindop's decision is eminently justified. He has made many discoveries about Williams's early life, and in the pre-1940 chapters we learn much about the English literary and publishing world of that era.

One key to the book—and to understanding Williams's life and accomplishments—is his Arthurian poetry. Lindop himself is a poet, whose original interest in Williams came from his admiration for the two collections *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*. On that basis, he terms Williams "a great poet."

I am delighted to read that evaluation from such a fully qualified source, as it is one I share, albeit with some embarrassment. Both collections are written in the intricate, allusive, and highly unfashionable manner of high modernism, and some individual poems seem almost willfully recondite and user-unfriendly. Even so, the overall vision of the whole epic cycle is awe-inspiring.

At their best, moreover, the poems are magnificent. I still happily recite the heartrending “Death of Palomides,” which includes in miniature so many of Williams’s core obsessions. It is Arthurian in the sense that Palomides is the unbaptized Saracen knight of the Round Table, who has failed in every aspiration of his life, including seeking the love of Iseult. Yet amid failure and defeat, he finds a triumphant new hope from two aged Jewish kabbalists, who teach him the mystical ascent to heaven through the interlinked paths of the Sefirotic Tree: “About me a scintillation of points / Points of the eagle’s plumes, plumes that are paths / Paths and plumes swoop to the unbelieved symbol.” At his death, Palomides is saved through the affirmation, “The Lord created all things by means of his Blessing.” Ultimately, the poem is a glorious hymn of victory.

Lindop shows just how long Williams held that Arthurian obsession—at least back to the turn of the 20th century—and how those ideas were the foundation of so much of this work. That connection makes wonderful sense in terms of the intimate connection in that era between medieval Romanticism and esoteric Christianity, with the Grail as the core Christian symbol.

This was after all a time when Wagner’s opera *Parsifal* was widely regarded as a supreme monument of visionary Christian culture—and as a doorway to occult speculation. It was Arthurian research that brought Williams into contact with Golden Dawn veteran A. E. Waite, and through him that Williams was initiated into the occult sects. The Grail is also the focus of Williams’s best-known novel, *War in Heaven*.

In many ways, the Williams of the 1940s, the Inklings years, was transmitting the fin de siècle or decadent literary enthusiasms he had discovered as a precocious teenager. Lindop has written a brilliant book about a brilliant, if troubling, man.