

“Excellent! This is one of the best books on the Inklings I’ve ever read.”

Walter Hooper, literary advisor to the C.S. Lewis Estate

“No subject fascinates me as much as the creative interaction of the Inklings, and I am glad to read this new account. It is a brisk and honest retelling of the group and its members, always mindful to connect the Inklings and their ideas to their larger context. It is Duriez’s best book to date. I recommend it.”

Diana Pavlac Glycer, author of *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*

“With *The Oxford Inklings*, Colin Duriez takes us deeper into the world of the Inklings than the commonly known facts about the writers to see how their scholarly work shaped their imaginations and their popular writing. Few people know the Inklings as intimately as Duriez who makes us feel as though he has just come from a morning with them at the Eagle and Child.”

Harry Lee Poe, author of *The Inklings of Oxford* and *C.S. Lewis Remembered*

“This is a valuable addition to Inklings studies, suitable both for beginners and for more seasoned readers. For those who don’t know too much about the Inklings, Duriez provides a readable and well-rounded overview of the lives and works of Lewis, Tolkien, and their friends who comprised this famous literary band of brothers. Duriez is well-known for his thorough and diligent research, so this book also offers surprising and delightful insights even for readers who are familiar with earlier studies of the Inklings. *The Oxford Inklings* is enjoyable and enlightening for readers of all levels!”

David C. Downing, author of *The Most Reluctant Convert* and *Looking for the King*

“Here Colin Duriez extends his early excellent work on the friendship of Lewis and Tolkien to an examination of the mutually supportive relationships of all the Inklings in context. There is a particularly useful chronology of their friendship and creativity. This is a comprehensive exploration of inter-Inklings relationships in which Duriez’s research is of its usual depth and quality and written in lucid prose that is a pleasure to read. It has the right emphasis, in Lewis’ words, on the Inklings’ ‘merriment, piety, and literature.’”

Revd Dr Jeanette Sears

“In this book, Colin Duriez offers readers an engaging, thoughtful look at the fascinating group of writers known as the Inklings. Building upon previous studies by Humphrey Carpenter, Diana Glyer, and others, Duriez brings new insights to bear as he contextualizes the thought and work of the Inklings, illuminating what drew them together as well as the profound yet still elusive influence they had upon each other. *The Oxford Inklings* is a worthy addition to the shelves of all who love the writings of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and their friends.”

Marjorie Lamp Mead, Associate Director, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Illinois, USA

“Just when I thought nothing new could be said about Lewis, Tolkien, Barfield, Williams, and the others, gifted author Colin Duriez presents fresh and fascinating insights that I will remember long after I place *The Oxford Inklings* on a shelf among my treasured favourites.”

Carolyn Curtis, author, editor, speaker, whose latest book is *Women and C.S. Lewis – What his life and literature reveal for today’s culture*

Some previous books by this author relating to the Inklings:

Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings: A Guide to Middle-earth (2001)

Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship (2003)

A Field Guide to Narnia (2004)

J.R.R. Tolkien: The Making of a Legend (2012)

Amazing and Extraordinary Facts: J.R.R. Tolkien (2012)

C.S. Lewis: A biography of friendship (2013)

The A-Z of C.S. Lewis: An encyclopedia of his life, thought and writings (2013)

THE OXFORD INKLINGS

LEWIS, TOLKIEN AND
THEIR CIRCLE

COLIN DURIEZ



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TO LEICESTER WRITERS' CLUB

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It is... easy to see why Authority frowns on Friendship. Every real Friendship is a sort of secession, even a rebellion... Hence if our masters... ever succeed in producing a world where all are Companions and none are Friends, they will have removed certain dangers, and will also have taken from us what is almost our strongest safeguard against complete servitude.

C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

Preface

The Inklings were an influential group of writers, along the lines of the Lake Poets or the Bloomsbury Group, centred most notably on C.S. Lewis, and with J.R.R. Tolkien also at the core. They met regularly in the pubs of St Giles, Oxford to talk, and in the college rooms of Lewis at Magdalen College or Tolkien at Merton College to read and discuss their latest writings, and to talk more widely. My book explores their lives, their writings, their ideas, and most crucially the influence they had on each other. A defining purpose behind the group emerges that celebrates its diversity and lack of formality, based on a profound understanding of friendship. My book seeks to explain the mystery of how this eclectic group of friends, without formal membership, agenda, or minutes, came to have a purpose that shaped the ideas and publications of the leading participants.

Those who have enjoyed the now-famous writings of core members such as Lewis, Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams often find that the existence of the Inklings takes on a great importance for them. Questions then start to emerge: who else was involved with the Inklings, and why do Owen Barfield and Charles Williams matter so much? What

difference did the Second World War make to the group, and why did they eventually stop meeting? This book explores the group's complex and fascinating interactions both within and outside the circle. I also consider the Christian faith of the group's members – of various, often surprising strands – which was a defining influence.

Although the Inklings were a literary group of friends, the membership was not made up exclusively of academics but included professional people from varied walks of life, from a doctor to a British army officer. The club existed in times of great change in Oxford, through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and petered out only with Lewis's death in 1963. Tolkien occasionally referred to it in his letters, once describing the club as an “undetermined and unelected circle of friends who gathered around C.S. L[ewis], and met in his rooms in Magdalen. Our habit was to read aloud compositions of various kinds (and lengths!)”.

Almost thirty years earlier, Tolkien had written to his publisher, Stanley Unwin, about Lewis's science-fiction story *Out of the Silent Planet*. He spoke of its “being read aloud to our local club (which goes in for reading things short and long aloud). It proved an exciting serial, and was highly approved. But of course we are all rather like-minded”. It is clear from Tolkien's letters that the Inklings provided valuable and much-needed encouragement as he struggled to compose *The Lord of the Rings*.

Another member, Oxford Classics don Colin Hardie, wrote of the Inklings and its literary character in 1983, around fifty years after its inception: “Oxford saw the informal formation of a select circle of friends, mostly writers or ‘scribblers’ (reminiscent perhaps of the 18th-century Scriblerus Club, whose members were Pope, Swift, Gay, Arbuthnot, author of

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the Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus, and others...).”

Most of the men in the circle of the Inklings were select friends of C.S. Lewis. It is inevitable, therefore, that there will be some overlap with the content of my book *C.S. Lewis: A biography of friendship*, which features a number of Lewis’s friends. In particular, I refer to certain events that are pivotal both to Lewis’s life and to the development of the Inklings as a group. I’ve done my best to keep any overlapping to the minimum. Where I’ve taken up material that is also in the biography of C.S. Lewis, it is here in an entirely different frame and setting. Thus the organization of each book is very different. Whereas accounts of Lewis’s friends in the biography serve to illuminate Lewis the man, and the development and shaping forces in his life, in my depiction of the Inklings, such accounts of friends are there to throw light on the group and its distinctive life and interactions as a community of friends.

I have been researching and writing on the Inklings for over forty years now, and this book draws on that work. Some contributions to essay collections or reference books are to be found in the bibliography. In 2000, my friend the late David Porter and I put together *The Inklings Handbook*, now long out of print. Even in the years since that book appeared there has been much new research on the group.

My own exposure to the Inklings was a process of gradual discovery. After reading C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* in class during my schooldays, I began reading everything I could find by the same author, little realizing the extent and range of his writings. Through this reading I gradually discovered Tolkien, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, and the existence of the Inklings. I also added to my reading other writers who had influenced them, such as George MacDonald. Their writings provided me with a key to why I liked so many other writers,

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many in the fields of science fiction and fantasy, but others where the connection was at first less clear, such as with William Golding and John Fowles. The list, like the road, goes ever on and on.

I mentioned that my interest in the Inklings has been long-standing, and as a result this book has inevitably been influenced by the work of others. Of those who have also written at length on the Inklings, particularly helpful have been Diana Glycer, Humphrey Carpenter, Gareth Knight, and Hal Poe. My visits to The Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, Illinois and the Special Collections Reading Room at the Bodleian Library in Oxford have been invaluable. Though long ago now, conversations I had with David Porter (often by telephone late at night) as we worked on our *Inklings Handbook* opened up the world of this extraordinary group of writers. As well as acknowledging my debt to those who have written on the Inklings, my thanks are also due to those who have been directly involved in the publication of this book, such as my editors, Ali Hull, Margaret Milton, and Helen Birkbeck, and also Jonathan Roberts, Leisa Nugent, Rhoda Hardie, and others at Lion Hudson.

Introduction

C.S. Lewis and the dinosaurs

In 1954, C.S. Lewis was at a turning point in his life. For nearly thirty years he had been a fellow and tutor in English at Magdalen College, Oxford. Though a popular lecturer with an impressive string of groundbreaking academic publications to his name, from *The Allegory of Love*, which came out in 1936, to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, published in 1954, he had been passed over several times for a Chair of English. In his personal life, it was over three years since Mrs Janie Moore, the woman he had looked after as devotedly as if she were his mother, had died, freeing him from a self-imposed burden of care. His brother, Warren, however, was falling into alcoholic blackouts with worrying frequency.

Lewis had also recently taken a change of direction in his writings, from a muscular intellectual defence of Christian beliefs as a high-profile apologist, to putting his creative energies into more overtly imaginative prose and fiction. *The Chronicles of Narnia* had flowed from his pen and also an autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. This book focused upon an experience he called “Joy”, which had led him from atheism to a belief in God, and was soon to be published.

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Then came an invitation from Cambridge University, offering him a newly created Chair of Medieval and Renaissance literature. Even before he was asked, the distinguished electors, who included two from Oxford (one of whom was his fellow Inkling J.R.R. Tolkien), had unanimously voted for Lewis as their first choice. Despite strong initial reservations, reflecting the swirl of issues he faced in his life at that time, Lewis was eventually persuaded to accept the post. Tolkien played a decisive role in persuading him. He could, Lewis found, remain living in Oxford but spend part of each week during term time living in his Cambridge college, in rooms large enough to house his essential library.

When Lewis presented his inaugural lecture in Cambridge on 29 November 1954 – his fifty-sixth birthday – he decided not to play safe. The public lecture gave him a platform from which to set out a defence of the “Old Western” or “Old European” values that he, along with Tolkien, had championed in their work, in both fiction and non-fiction. Both were central members of the Inklings, and the thrust of Lewis’s lecture might perhaps provide an initial insight into the heart of what the Inklings were all about. Were they reactionaries, standing against the flow of a new world that was being built according to a blatant modernist blueprint? Or was there a strategy in their concerns that could point to a different kind of contemporary world, rooted in old virtues and values? Could there conceivably be a modern society that was marked by continuity rather than discontinuity with the past? He donnishly called the lecture *De Descriptione Temporum*: “a description of our time”.

One friend of Lewis’s who wished to be at the lecture but couldn’t attend was Dorothy L. Sayers, of detective-fiction fame. She encouraged her brilliant friend Barbara Reynolds to

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attend, and Reynolds duly reported on it to her. On reading that report, Miss Sayers concluded that Lewis had been remarkably restrained! She replied to Barbara Reynolds: “It sounds as though he had been on his best behaviour – he can sometimes be very naughty and provocative – but he probably thought that his Inaugural was not quite the moment for such capers.”¹

Another female friend of Lewis’s, however, was there lending her support: Joy Davidman Gresham. She was an American poet and novelist who had come to live in England partly at least to further her friendship with him. At first, she had mainly been a very interesting pen pal. Later, she was to become his wife.

In a letter dated 23 December 1954, Joy Davidman described the lecture to a fellow American and friend of C.S. Lewis, Chad Walsh, as:

... brilliant, intellectually exciting, unexpected, and funny as hell – as you can imagine. The hall was crowded, and there were so many capped and gowned dons in the front rows that they looked like a rookery. Instead of talking in the usual professorial way about the continuity of culture, the value of traditions, etc., he announced that “Old Western Culture”, as he called it, was practically dead, leaving only a few scattered survivors like himself ...

C.S. Lewis dramatically challenged the big division commonly made between the medieval period, which, as he saw it, had been discarded as having no relevance for life and culture today, and a forward-looking Renaissance. Privately he joked about whether he should have taken on the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance literature at the English School in Cambridge, as he believed that the Renaissance as it is commonly

understood never happened! (In fact, the university had deliberately brought the two periods together in the newly created post, with C.S. Lewis in mind for it.) As an alternative, Lewis put forward what he considered to be the real break in Western culture, in the light of which the differences between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are overwhelmingly outweighed by the affinities between the two periods:

Roughly speaking we may say that whereas all history was for our ancestors divided into two periods, the pre-Christian and the Christian, and two only, for us it falls into three – the pre-Christian, the Christian, and what may reasonably be called the post-Christian... I am considering them simply as cultural changes. When I do that, it appears to me that the second change is even more radical than the first.

Between Jane Austen and us, but not between her and Shakespeare, Chaucer, Alfred, Virgil, Homer, or the Pharaohs, comes the birth of the machines... this is parallel to the great changes by which we divide epochs of pre-history. This is on a level with the change from stone to bronze, or from a pastoral to an agricultural economy. It alters Man's place in nature.²

In the light of such a perspective, we can see that the fiction of his fellow Inkling, Tolkien, very much embodies the themes of Lewis's lecture, even though Lewis offered generalizations of a scale Tolkien would rarely attempt, at least in public. Tolkien's "Old Western" themes can be seen clearly, for instance, in the way he explored the related topics of possession and power. Possession is a unifying theme in his stories, from the craving of Morgoth – a high-ranking angelic being – to have God's

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power of creation, to the temptation of wielding the One Ring that faced many protagonists in *The Lord of the Rings*. The wrong use of power is characteristically expressed by Tolkien in magic, embodied in the misuse of mechanism and technology. Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman, all of whom embraced the dark side, experiment with genetic engineering – the creation of robot-like orcs – and use or encourage the use of machines created with the aim of extending their powers. The Ring itself is a machine, the result of Sauron’s technological skills. It is in fact a super-machine, which goes beyond incorporating an artificial intelligence to carrying and containing in some way much of its maker’s powers (or part of his soul, to use a different language).

Tolkien contrasts this evil magic with art, typified in the Elves, who have no desire for domination of others. Similarly, Lewis saw a machine-centred attitude, or technocracy, as the modern form of magic, seeking to control and possess nature for ends that turn out to be destructive of our very humanity, and he expressed this theme in his final science-fiction novel, *That Hideous Strength*.

In his inaugural lecture, Lewis defined the “Old West” by placing it in sharp contrast to our modern world. The Great Divide lay, he believed, somewhere in the early nineteenth century. It was as much a social and cultural divide as a shift in ideas and beliefs. On the other hand, Lewis saw positive values in pre-Christian paganism that prefigured the Christian values he so championed. That paganism belonged to a vast period of continuity that predated the Middle Ages and included the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome. He declared in his lecture that “Christians and Pagans had much more in common with each other than either has with a post-Christian. The gap between those who worship different gods

is not so wide as that between those who worship and those who do not". The post-Christian in our modern age of the machine, by being severed from the "Christian past", is in consequence doubly cut off from the "Pagan past".

Lewis brought his lecture to an end with a stunning piece of rhetoric that drove home his convictions about the past and the modern West, and his status as an "Old Western Man" within the new milieu:

It is my settled conviction that in order to read Old Western literature aright you must suspend most of the responses and unlearn most of the habits you have acquired in reading modern Literature. And because this is the judgment of a native, I claim that, even if the defence of my conviction is weak, the fact of my conviction is a historical *datum* to which you should give full weight. That way where I fail as a critic, I may yet be useful as a specimen. I would even dare to go further. Speaking not only for myself but for all other Old Western men whom you may meet, I would say, use your specimens while you can. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs.³

Joy Davidman observed, in her letter to Chad Walsh, that Lewis claimed "the change to the Age of Science was more profound than that from Medieval to Renaissance or even Classical to Dark Ages, and that learning about literature from him would be rather like having a Neanderthal man to lecture on the Neanderthal or studying paleontology from a live dinosaur!"⁴

As a woman, Dorothy L. Sayers could never be part of the Inklings – even in the 1950s, when it was only a pub-based conversation group. However, she had an obvious affinity

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with Lewis's mindset, as is clear from her letters. A few months after the inaugural Cambridge lecture, she concluded a letter to "Jack" with: "All good greetings from your obliged and appreciative fellow-dinosaur." The warmth of her friendship is also revealed in the previous sentence, which playfully refers to Lewis's Cambridge college, Magdalene: "I hope the Lady who sits upon the Waters is gracious to you."⁵ The Lady is Mary Magdalene, and the "Waters" is a reference to the River Cam, beside the college.⁶

Lewis must have known that there would be a reaction to his lecture. As he no doubt expected, it did not go down well with an influential element at the university. They effectively saw the new professor (and perhaps even the new Chair) as a strategy from the murky depth of a stagnant backwater to revive the corpse of a lost Christendom. Ruffled, their response was lightning quick. *Twentieth Century*, in February 1955, devoted its entire issue to the unfolding disaster in Cambridge. Its twelve contributors, from a range of disciplines, were at one over "the importance of free liberal, humane inquiry, which they conceive to be proper not only to a university community but to any group that claims to be civilized". Novelist E.M. Forster was one of them. He was indignant that religion was attacking humanism. By "humanism", the contributors actually meant "Orthodox Atheism", as Lewis saw it. E.M. Forster declared that humanism's "stronghold in history, the Renaissance, is alleged not to have existed".⁷ Lewis had blown the trumpet. The walls of humanism might be weakened.

The BBC did not share such an alarmist view. It took the unusual step of broadcasting an inaugural lecture from a new professor. In April 1955, C.S. Lewis redelivered his Cambridge lecture as a two-part series in front of a BBC microphone, under the title "The Great Divide".

To obtain another glimpse of what might be a group affinity among members of the Inklings, it is necessary to take a backward glance to nearly twenty years before the lecture in which Lewis declared himself a dinosaur and valuable relic of the Old West. If a kind of group mind or shared worldview existed, we could presume that important members of the Inklings were fellow dinosaurs or valuable specimens of a lost, Old Western culture, given Lewis's weight in the circle. The event that might cast light on the more ultimate concerns of the Inklings only included two members, the close friends Lewis and Tolkien, but nevertheless represents a key moment in the group's literary output. That point, two decades before Lewis's introduction to Cambridge, represented a crisis period in their lives. Both had published little scholarship for a substantial period, though Lewis's *The Allegory of Love*, many years in preparation, would soon appear, as would Tolkien's milestone essay on *Beowulf*.

The event was a conversation that took place sometime in the spring of 1936. As well as their regular Thursday-night Inklings gatherings, Lewis and Tolkien were in the habit of meeting in Lewis's college rooms of a Monday morning, then decamping to the Eastgate Hotel, conveniently nearby. According to Tom Shippey, both must have felt anxious and under-published, with only each other to keep them writing. Both frustrated writers felt that their ambitions to be significant poets had been thwarted, even though both had devoted "immense time and energy to writing poetry".⁸

On the particular spring Monday in question, on which Lewis and Tolkien met as usual, the former presented a challenge. In doing this, he might well have been inspired by a novel by Charles Williams that he had recently read, called *The*

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Place of the Lion. This was a rare work of modern-day Christian fantasy, which in turn owed something to the fiction of G.K. Chesterton, a favourite writer of Lewis's. In a letter written later in the year to a friend, Leo Baker, Lewis clearly had by then also read Charles Williams's novel *Many Dimensions*, and commented: "In the rare genre of 'theological shocker' which Chesterton (I think) invented, these are superb."⁹

Certainly, even with Chesterton and this new discovery of Williams's fiction, Lewis was deeply dissatisfied. It is quite probable that after the two had settled into the chesterfield in Lewis's white-panelled rooms, and were comfortably drinking in the smoky haze from their pipes or cigarettes, Lewis said something like: "You know, Tollers, there's far too little nowadays of what we like in stories. There's nothing for it but we write something ourselves." He knew Tolkien would agree. Perhaps one or the other mentioned Williams's *The Place of the Lion*.

The Place of the Lion gives us a good idea of what both Lewis and Tolkien liked in contemporary fiction. It had been lent to Lewis earlier in the year by fellow Inkling Nevill Coghill. In fact, the book had made such a deep impression on Lewis that he had written to its author, who worked at the London branch of the Oxford University Press. He had been bowled over by its heady mix of Plato and the biblical book of Genesis, and the days of creation played an important part in the plot. He also felt that it had an unsettling relevance to the foibles of his profession as a university academic.

In a letter to a close friend, Arthur Greeves, he had shared his discovery. The story, he explained, was based on Plato's theory of the other world (a theory that had shaped much of Western thought over the ages). Here the archetypes or originals of all earthly qualities exist, such as beauty, love, and

the “hedgehogness” of the hedgehog. In Williams’s novel these primeval archetypes were absorbing their real copies in our world back into themselves – at the beginning of the story, all butterflies on earth flew back into the original butterfly. The processes of creation began to flow back to the state they were in at the beginning of time, and consequently the world itself was threatened by non-existence. In that same letter Lewis remarked, “It isn’t often now-a-days you get a Christian fantasy.”¹⁰

Early in the story, two friends get caught up in a search that is under way for an escaped lioness. Shortly afterwards, the two see another lion. It soon becomes evident that this is no ordinary lion. It had

the shape of a full-grown and tremendous lion, its head flung back, its mouth open, its body quivering. It ceased to roar, and gathered itself back into itself. It was a lion such as the young men had never seen in any zoo or menagerie; it was gigantic and seemed to their dazed senses to be growing larger every moment... Awful and solitary it stood... Then, majestically, it moved... and while they still stared it entered into the dark shadow of the trees and was hidden from sight.

There is something perhaps of the future Aslan in that description, even though there is no evidence that it is a source of elements of Narnia. It is perhaps more feasible that Williams, and Lewis, more than a decade later, were drawing on an ancient form of human imagining. But whereas Aslan is the glad and good creator, the lion archetype in Williams’s story has become a destructive power through human tampering with the forces of creation.

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By coincidence, Charles Williams had been reading the proofs of Lewis's *The Allegory of Love*, a learned and elegantly written study of courtly love in the Middle Ages. Rarely had he been so excited by one of his firm's publications. Rather overwhelmed, he decided to write to Lewis, but received a letter from Lewis before he could. This praised *The Place of the Lion*, and invited Williams to attend an Inklings meeting in Oxford. That letter is the first documented use of the term "the Inklings", by Lewis or other members. It throws important light on the nature of the club, from its early years. Lewis enthused:

A book sometimes crosses one's path which is... like the sound of one's native language in a strange country... It is to me one of the major literary events of my life – comparable to my first discovery of George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, or Wm. Morris. ... Coghill of Exeter put me on to the book: I have put on Tolkien (the Professor of Anglo-Saxon and a papist) and my brother. So there are three dons and one soldier all buzzing with excited admiration. We have a sort of informal club called the Inklings: the qualifications (as they have informally evolved) are a tendency to write, and Christianity.¹¹

The letter included an invitation for Williams to meet the group one evening in the summer term, and to be Lewis's guest at his college. Williams frequently visited Oxford in his capacity as an editor at the London branch of the Oxford University Press, to liaise with the Oxford branch. In July that year, for instance, he met the youthful poet W.H. Auden in Oxford. An important part of his responsibility was to build the poetry list.

Charles Williams replied to C.S. Lewis by return of post, his affinity with Lewis's way of thinking clear. Williams wrote: "I regard your book as practically the only one that I have ever come across, since Dante, that shows the slightest understanding of what this very peculiar identity of love and religion means."

Nevill Coghill remembered that first meeting: "[Lewis] introduced him to the Inklings... to our great delight."¹² It was Coghill who had come across *The Place of the Lion* and introduced the story to Lewis by vividly retelling the plot and relaying the cosmic scope of the story. After Lewis, his brother, Warren, Tolkien, and perhaps also Barfield read the novel, creating the buzz of excitement in the group.

Tolkien described what happened when Lewis presented the challenge, on the spring morning when the two met as usual, that he and Tolkien needed to write a story that would be the sort of thing they both liked. In letters written in later years, he refers to the event on five separate occasions, which underlines its importance to him. In one letter, he even identified it as the origin of his follow-up to *The Hobbit* – *The Lord of the Rings*. At some point, Lewis had suggested that one of them should write an excursionary tale about space, and the other one on time. He pulled out a coin and they tossed for who wrote which. The result was that Tolkien was assigned to write a time story and Lewis a space one.

To both men it was a challenge, as up to this point they had published only poetry (with little success) and scholarly publications relating mainly to medieval language and literature. Now they were pledging to write fiction that would appeal to a wide readership. True, there was one exception. Lewis had published a story called *The Pilgrim's Regress*, in the manner of the seventeenth-century *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but

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it had garnered a modest readership. In Tolkien's case, he had privately written extensive stories and other matter concerning his invented world of Middle-earth, particularly its First Age. This would not be published until after his death, in *The Silmarillion*, the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, and other books. Popular fiction was another matter, though. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* was soon to go to his publisher.

The first fruit of C.S. Lewis's excursion into space was *Out of the Silent Planet*, published in 1938 after being read aloud to the Inklings. Tolkien's initial attempt at a time-travel book, *The Lost Road*, which might also have been aired to the Inklings, was abandoned. In its place, he took up writing a sequel to the popular *The Hobbit* (1937), but aimed at an adult readership. In a letter to a reader of the recently published first two volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien once again recorded his memory of the conversation in which Lewis had presented the challenge, and wrote of the long labour, and the reward and encouragement he had received from its publication. It was a conversation that changed both their lives.

Through love and beyond Charles Williams, the enigmatic Inklings

It is more than likely that Charles Williams met C.S. Lewis and then the other Inklings quite soon after their enthusiastic exchange of letters, sometime in the spring or early summer of 1936. Williams would then have been close to fifty, with around nine years of his life left and fifteen books to bring out. He had already developed the distinctive ideas that were so to appeal to Lewis in particular. His two volumes of poems relating to King Arthur were yet to appear, as were his novels *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows' Eve*. Also still to come was his celebrated history of the Holy Spirit in the church, *The Descent of the Dove*, which played a part in the conversion to Christianity of the poet W.H. Auden. It was not until the war years that he met regularly with C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, and the Inklings, in the last five and a half years or so of his life.

Charles Williams was one of a number of writers admired by Lewis, Tolkien, and other dominant figures in the group. This admiration may well have been a tacit recognition by one or several of the Inklings of affinities with their group spirit or even their worldview, however vaguely they saw it. These were writers such as George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton,

and even, for Owen Barfield, the highly unorthodox Rudolf Steiner, the founder of a religious movement called anthroposophy, which has an esoteric interpretation of Christianity (including a belief in reincarnation), science, and culture. There were also more recent authors who were or would be recognized by Inklings members as being the kind of thinker or writer that they liked, such as Dorothy L. Sayers and E.R. Eddison. For medievalists like Lewis and Tolkien, there were poets and thinkers over the vast period of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance who gave them nourishment and inspiration, such as Edmund Spenser, Dante, and the author of the great Old English poem *Beowulf*, as well as the Church Fathers Athanasius and Augustine and others who influenced the period, such as Boethius. Classicists such as Colin Hardie or the classically erudite among the group, such as the polymath Lewis, would have easily recognized affinities with their concerns even further back, in pre-Christian, pagan Greece and Rome.

An affinity, a shared outlook, and even an almost unconsciously accepted worldview are hard to present in the abstract. The life and impact of Charles Williams does, however, shed an admittedly rather complex light on whatever held the Inklings together, if they were more than simply a group of Lewis's friends. Williams is an enigma who perhaps mirrors the mystery at the heart of the Inklings. An obscure group of professional people and Oxford dons were brought together by a desire to write and by a traditional Christianity considered outmoded by many in the mainstream. They nevertheless encouraged and helped to bring about writings by C.S. Lewis and Tolkien in particular that are now popular throughout the world and which have been transposed into modern media, such as films using CGI (computer-generated

imagery), thereby gaining a global appeal. What would have seemed a premodern eccentricity to many of their contemporaries at Oxford turned out to have an astounding postmodernist appeal, beginning after Lewis's death in the 1960s.

Who was Charles Williams? John Wain, an undergraduate when Williams was in Oxford during the Second World War, remarked: "How many people have tried to describe this extraordinary man, and how his essence escapes them!"¹

Williams's birthplace was London, and it was to this city that he was to give his allegiance. His London accent indicated his origin, contrasting as it did with the cut-glass tones of many he was to encounter among the Inklings and Oxford dons.

He was born in one of a row of three-storey Victorian houses in Spencer Road (later renamed Caedmon Road), near the Holloway Road between Highbury and Holloway, on 20 September 1886, and was christened Charles Walter Stansby Williams. His sister, Edith, was born in 1889. His father, Walter, who had also been born in London, was a foreign correspondence clerk in French and German for a company involved in importing goods. Charles's early memories included the clop-clopping of horses, the rumbling metal-clad wheels of city traffic, and the distinctive sound of steam trains on the nearby viaduct over Hornsey Road. Walter and his wife, Mary, had a devout Christian faith and it was the family custom to attend the nearby St Anne's Church, sometimes twice on a Sunday. Mary remembered that Charles invariably marched "into church as if he owned the place" and joined in the singing with gusto.

The family lived in London until Charles was eight and Edith was five. By that time his father's eyesight was failing,

and the firm that employed him was in terminal decline. Walter had been told that the only hope for saving his vision was to live nearer the countryside. This was a blow to him, as he was as attached to the metropolis as Charles was later to be. However, the family moved to St Albans, less than twenty miles to the north of the capital. The city is named after the first known Christian martyr, and was originally a major Roman settlement, located on the old Roman road of Watling Street.

Walter and Mary set up a shop in St Albans called The Art Depot, selling artists' materials and stationery. The shop had two substantial windows and Mary, ever inventive, curtained them simply. Years later, Charles's wife, Florence, was to write of it: "I loved that shop and residence and its garden." She found the residential part of the building attractive, with "Victorian furniture polished and plain in design with no Victorian hotch-potch". Florence described Charles's mother as a woman of strong vitality: she outlived her son by nearly three years, dying at ninety-two. Mary Williams was excellent company and full of enjoyment of life, in spite of her hard struggle against poverty.

Her husband read widely until his sight became too bad, and had poetry and short stories published in a range of periodicals. He was very interested in his gifted son, guiding and encouraging him. This affectionate and helpful relationship between father and son can be paralleled with that between the writer George MacDonald (one of the "literary household gods" of the Inklings, according to a young member)² and his father in the Scottish Highlands, far earlier in the nineteenth century. It contrasts sharply with the often fraught and far less happy relationship that C.S. Lewis had with his widowed father. Charles and Walter took long

walks together in the Hertfordshire countryside, and he was to dedicate his third book of poems to “my father and my other teachers”.

When he was about eight, just after moving from London, Charles Williams began his schooling at St Albans Abbey School and four years later he gained a County Council scholarship, which enabled him to go to St Albans School. Unlike most of his later Inklings friends, but like J.R.R. Tolkien, he thus had a grammar-school education rather than boarding at an elite public school. Grammar schools originally emphasized classical languages (initially Latin), but later developed an increasingly broad curriculum, always with an academic emphasis.

At this school Charles made a lasting friendship with a boy named George Robinson, who saw things as he did, sharing his tastes, favourite books, and attempts at writing. With Charles and his sister, Edith, Robinson sometimes acted in plays performed for the family circle. The opening lines of one of these plays – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *The Golden Legend* – show that Charles’s interests then were similar to those in later life: the conflict between the powers of good and evil. The opening reads: “The spire of Strasbourg Cathedral. Night and Storm. LUCIFER, with the powers of the Air, trying to tear down the Cross.”

Some of Charles’s fantasy-building, recalled by his friend Robinson, was very comic. But there was a deeper side to the rather serious, shy youth. Charles imagined himself and his friends participating in myths and rituals. This habit of seeing daily life in terms of ceremony, fantasy, and myth was lifelong. The masques he later wrote in the 1920s for fellow staff of the OUP were an extension of this proclivity; the parts were written for and acted by Charles’s colleagues. Even

his employer, the head of the London branch, was connected in Williams's mind with his imaginative creation, the Emperor in Byzantium, who was part of the world of his Arthurian poetry.

Charles and George Robinson both gained places at University College, London, and began study in Gower Street, near the British Museum, in the autumn of 1901. They were both fifteen. The Latin professor at the time was the poet A.E. Housman, but Charles was to make no reference to any influence of his teaching in his future writing. Charles took courses in mathematics, literature, history, and languages.

Unfortunately, with Walter now blind enough to be disabled, Charles's parents could not afford to keep their brilliant son on until the end of his three-year course at University College. He was forced to leave after two years. Seeking alternatives, Charles failed the Civil Service exam for a Second Division Clerkship. Prospects looked gloomy for him. His kindly Aunt Alice, however, discovered an advertisement for a minor job at the Methodist Bookroom³ in London and posted it to Charles, who subsequently began working at the bookshop in 1904. Edith remembered, years later: "The work there was mostly packing, but at the same time he attended classes at the Working Men's College [in London], where he met Fred Page, who introduced him to the Oxford University Press."⁴

In those early days, Williams and George Robinson belonged to a discussion group in St Albans who called themselves the "Theological Smokers". Robinson recalls that "over pipes, cigarettes, coffee and cakes" they "explored the universe, regretted non-conformity, had a sneaking regard for but kept a wary eye on His Holiness – all... enlivened by the fondness which Charles and I had for changing our positions halfway through the discussion, so that we could see what

was on the other side!” Charles Williams enjoyed such lively, opinion-changing discussions throughout his life, culminating in the give and take of the Inklings’ gatherings.

He made two acquaintances at the evening classes at the Working Men’s College, Crowndale Road, in Camden Town, who became close friends: Harold Eyers and Ernest Nottingham. Charles lost both companions in the First World War, Eyers in May 1915 and Nottingham in 1917. For his part, he was rejected for military service because of a noticeable neurological disorder that caused his hands to tremble and shake, a condition that he put down to a severe bout of measles when young.

It had been through the camaraderie of the Working Men’s College that Charles had got to know Fred Page of Oxford University Press. Page had needed help with the proofreading of a complete edition of William Thackeray that was going through the press. On Page’s recommendation Charles was employed by the publishing house, and he was to remain on their staff until his death. Though Williams was destined never to leave the London office of the OUP, the office itself was to move to temporary accommodation in Oxford thirty or so years later for the duration of the Second World War. While there, it remained the “London office”.

During the early years of his employment, Charles added a unique quality to life in the OUP building near St Paul’s, in the City of London (the business centre). The atmosphere was recalled affectionately by his biographer, Alice Hadfield, who later worked there. It was characteristic that metaphysical debates would occur halfway up staircases, and the library became the setting for the masques written by Charles. One of these featured the lamentable theme of a lack of readers for an OUP book on Syrian nouns!

Around this time Charles married his sweetheart, Florence Conway of St Albans, whom he was to call Michal, after King David's wife who mocked her royal husband when he danced before the Lord. She was tall, confident, and lively, with expressive dark eyes. They had met while helping at a parish children's Christmas party. This was the twenty-one-year-old Charles's first experience of romantic love, and it shook him to the core. It was not long before he had written a sequence of sonnets based on falling in love, which became his first book of poems *The Silver Stair*. The collection's technique was derivative of a number of established poets.

The publication of the book in 1912 was paid for by the husband of the poet Alice Meynell. This couple had befriended and encouraged Williams, whose abilities they recognized. It was his first contact with other authors simply on the strength of his own writing. Previously, Wilfrid and Alice Meynell had nurtured Francis Thompson, and published his poems.

Charles and Florence did not marry until April 1917, when he was thirty and she almost that age. It is perhaps significant that they decided to set up home in London, well away from their families in St Albans. Their first flat was at 18 Parkhill Road, NW3, near Hampstead. In 1922, Michael Williams, their only child, entered their lives. Charles held the view that children were distinguished strangers with whom communication was difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, he participated in the inevitable disruption of normal routine created by baby Michael's arrival.

In the autumn of that year of change, Charles started what was to become a regular engagement – giving adult evening classes on literature for the London County Council at the City Literary Institute and other venues, to supplement the modest family income. His usual commitment was a weekly

two-hour session. Then he would come home and settle down to writing. Florence recalled: "When Charles was writing his life of Sir Francis Bacon I was aroused at one a.m. to hear details of that great man's passing. I heard the last two chapters of *The Greater Trumps* at three a.m...."

The rule of the LCC evening lectures was one hour of lecturing and one hour of questions. The then undiscovered Dylan Thomas came in later years to hear his lectures. Charles was concerned about Thomas's penniless state, which was far worse than that of most poets.⁵ Dylan Thomas commented on the quality of the lectures to Williams: "Why, you come into the room and talk about Keats and Blake as if they were *alive!*"⁶

Charles carried over his style of teaching into his Oxford lectures during the Second World War. The response of an undergraduate at that time is therefore likely to have captured the flavour of the previous long years of lecturing. John Wain, who later became a member of the Inklings, remembered: "He ranted and threw back his head... and stamped up and down on the platform, but there was always the feeling that he was not doing it to impress us with his own importance, but rather with the importance of the material he was dealing with. His mood never seemed to fall below the level of blazing enthusiasm. Great poetry was something to be revelled in, to be rejoiced over, and Williams revelled and rejoiced up there before our eyes. When he quoted, which he did continually and from memory, he shouted the lines at the top of his voice like an operatic tenor tearing into an aria... it was magnificent."⁷

Charles's unique style, revealing his eccentricities, was in evidence in the 1930s when he gave popular talks at a girls' school, the head teacher of which, Miss Olive Willis, was a friend of his. One pupil acted out her impression of Charles

(whom they affectionately nicknamed “Chas. Bill”) speaking on poetic drama to her cousin, Lois Lang-Sims. Later in life, Lois was to get to know Charles closely.

No professional clown, it would seem, could have beaten his performances. In graphic imitation of his antics, my cousin would stride up and down an imaginary stage, grimacing like a maniacal monkey, clasping her arms about her as she mimicked his habit of seizing one of the stage curtains in a wild embrace while the school held its breath. “We always think it’s going to come down on his head when he does that, but it hasn’t – yet.”⁸

One of the deep strands in Charles Williams’s life was an interest in magic and the occult. He became connected with a branch of the Rosicrucians, of whose far-flung variations Aleister Crowley and W.B. Yeats were members. All such societies were secretive, and thus information about their inner workings is vague. Charles belonged to a splinter group called the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, founded by A.E. Waite, which was marked by esoteric secret rituals that did not involve magic. Charles’s active membership lasted between four and ten years.⁹ Some esoteric elements of this movement, which Charles left in the 1920s, can be found in his fiction. The Tarot cards, for instance, are at the centre of his novel *The Greater Trumps*. They were used merely as apparatus in the stories, though, not as beliefs – the novels express an orthodox Christianity, as captured in church creeds.

C.S. Lewis met W.B. Yeats in 1921 when the Irish poet lived in Oxford and was full of his form of Rosicrucianism. Lewis perhaps based the wizard Merlin on him in his novel *That Hideous Strength*. Charles also met Yeats on occasions, and

there is a photo of the two men posing for a photograph, both in suits and wearing homburg hats, with Yeats looking the more relaxed.

Interest in spiritual, mystical, and occult groups was a trend among writers in the early twentieth century, and those who were exploring included Christians of various shades and hues, including Evelyn Underhill and Owen Barfield. Barfield became convinced, in the 1920s, that the arcane teaching of anthroposophy was not only Christian, but a highly important expression of Christianity in the twentieth century. Its esoteric and very unorthodox interpretation was, he believed, the right one, leading the way in the evolution of human consciousness. Evelyn Underhill wrote on mysticism and Christian spirituality, and composed three novels, including *The Grey World*.¹⁰

Charles lifted the symbolism of alchemy and the Jewish Kabbalah from his involvement with the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross and built them into his Christian writings. They formed a pattern of imagery rather than a replacement for the central teachings of Christianity, and in these writings he increasingly distanced himself from the misuse of power characteristic of the darker side of such secret movements. He was deeply aware of the dangers of such misuse, and struggled with them in his personal life.

Charles Williams had a charismatic personality, and his teaching in evening classes, like some of his books, had a strong hold over people. He gained a popular following, and there were some who wished him to lead them in some kind of group or religious order. His popular theology was becoming indirectly enshrined in his novels, in theological books such as *He Came Down From Heaven* (1938), *The Descent of the Dove* (1939), and *The Forgiveness of Sins* (1942), and in

his Arthurian poetry. Even his literary studies would examine the theological implications of romantic love, as in *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943), on Dante's poetry. As someone whose commitment to the Anglican Church was lifelong, Williams at first resisted the pressure to form a religious group. Eventually something like a religious order was formed, which worked within Anglican worship and practice. David Porter, who wrote on the Inklings, explains Williams's concept of "Co-inherence", which lay at the centre of the companionship he created:

All life depends on mutual giving and receiving, ultimately derived from the Trinity and most powerfully displayed on the cross [of Christ]. This idea runs through all his writing... Charles Williams portrays the experience of being "in love" as a kind of naïve apprehension of Co-inherence, a heightened awareness of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all. In 1938 Charles Williams proposed the formation of an Order, a proposal which is set out in the Appendix to *The Descent of the Dove*, which is dedicated to "The Companions of the Co-inherence". The seven statements of the Order declared Co-inherence to be a natural and supernatural matter, by nature Christian; cited such precepts as "Am I my brother's keeper?" and "Bear ye one another's burdens"; and invoked the atonement as "the root of all".¹¹

The strong charismatic hold he had over many people, including women followers, could too easily be misused, as seems to have been the case in his imposition of disciplines on his tolerant and uncomplaining adult followers. This

included Charles's own variety of inflicted penance, such as writing out lines, standing in corners, having ankles tied with string, being smacked with a ruler, and even bizarre rituals with a ceremonial wooden sword from his days with the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross. His final novel, *All Hallows' Eve* (1945), which he would later read in instalments to the Inklings, clearly repudiates the practice of magic and the self-centredness of its power. A central malevolent character, Simon the Clerk, is perhaps modelled on Aleister Crowley, who had a certain notoriety.

For all his strangeness, the abiding impression Williams left with both his most devoted followers and those fellow authors who admired him (such as T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, and C.S. Lewis) was of a saintly man, who was at home in both ordinary and mystical realms. Alice Mary Hadfield, Williams's biographer and one of his followers who openly described the disciplines he imposed, concluded:

C. W. might talk to you for an hour, he might take you out for tea, write letters to you, ring you up, make you read verse, learn collects, keep your temper once a week, write essays for him, but after a month your attention was more directed to the Holy Ghost and to Milton than to C. W.¹²

By 1936, as we have seen, when C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams first made contact, Charles had published five novels and a sixth was in preparation. Much of his poetry is quite difficult to understand, and so is some of his prose, when writing on literary subjects or popular theology. The novels, however, by necessity, are accessible, and introduce the main themes of Charles's highly imaginative thinking. Getting to know his themes through the novels helps us to understand

his most important poems, the sequence based upon legends of King Arthur, which started to appear in 1938.

Charles's first and least accomplished novel was *Shadows of Ecstasy*, which did not appear for perhaps seven years after its writing, as he was at first unable to get it published. It finally came out in 1933, and centres on a university professor, Roger Ingram, "carried away" by poetry. He is attracted by a mysterious figure of great charisma, Nigel Considine, who seems to have conquered death itself. Considine leads a mass uprising from Africa against the white races of Europe.

War in Heaven (1930) was Charles's first published novel. It shows that he felt that the movement of every human being towards heaven or hell, and the nature of good and evil, were the most fascinating themes for a story. The novel opens like a conventional detective story with a mystery body lying in a publisher's office. An important theme (running through many of the novels) is the misuse of power. By the discovery of the legendary Holy Graal (Charles's preferred spelling), a retired senior publisher seeks control over others and over death itself.

His next novel, *Many Dimensions* (1931), reveals many people trying to use an ancient, precious stone of King Solomon for their own ends: political, economic, plain selfish, or even health ones. Those in whom good holds sway see that the temptation to misuse the stone must be resisted and renounced. There are parallels with the Ring of Power in Tolkien's later work *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Place of the Lion (1931) was the novel that led to C.S. Lewis's friendship with Charles Williams: he was deeply impressed by its remarkable blend of "Genesis and Platonism", as noted earlier. In Charles's hands, Platonic ideas – spiritual powers – become terribly real. At the centre

of the story is a vision of hell that provides the background to the ordinary decisions and actions of people; evil turns some of them literally into beasts, as dominant powers within transform them. Salvation lies in becoming like the new Adam, the divine human, who has the ultimate power over creation.

In *The Greater Trumps* (1932), Henry Lee and his grandfather, by possession of the original Tarot cards, desire union by magic with the power of destiny, which creates and controls the matter of life. At one point, a giant snowstorm is conjured up by using the cards and becomes out of control, with terrifying results. Henry is saved from destruction by the selfless love of his fiancée, Nancy Coningsby.

Descent into Hell (1937) was in preparation when it is likely that Lewis and Charles Williams first met. It concerns Pauline Anstruther's discovery of the doctrine of substituted love – that is, taking literally Christ's command to bear one another's burdens. This basic theme of Charles's writings was to deeply influence C.S. Lewis, and later in life he came to believe that he had actually taken on some of his dying wife's pain. The novel is one of Charles Williams's best.

It would take a whole book to set out the themes explored in the novels, the secret to understanding Williams's later, important Arthurian poems. But this brief overview can at least point to his affinity with the Inklings prior to his knowledge of and introduction to the group.

In 1933, C.S. Lewis had published his first work of fiction, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the purpose of which was explained rather cryptically in its subtitle, "An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism". Charles Williams's thought and writings centre on those three themes highlighted by Lewis: Christianity, reason, and romanticism.

Like Lewis, at the time of their first acquaintance Charles Williams was a member of the Anglican Church, though distinctly High Anglican (unlike Lewis, who claimed to be neither especially High nor Low Church, and had a strong Puritan streak).¹³ Theologically, Charles was somewhere between Lewis and the staunch Roman Catholic J.R.R. Tolkien. His allegiance remained to Anglicanism from childhood to death. His beliefs, like those of his friend Dorothy L. Sayers, were based on the historic creeds of the church. And, also like her, he was a writer of lay theology, beginning with *He Came Down From Heaven* in 1938. He emerged as one of a movement of influential lay theologians, which would also include Dorothy L. Sayers and C.S. Lewis, and already was represented by writers such as G.K. Chesterton and T.S. Eliot. Charles Williams probably first met Eliot in 1931 at one of Lady Ottoline Morrell's famous literary gatherings, which she hosted at that time in the Bloomsbury area of London. Both appeared regularly on her guest list.¹⁴

John Heath-Stubbs, poet and critic, pointed out: "Charles Williams' thought is based not on abstract premises but on the experience of human relationships – man's relationship to a personal God and to his fellow creatures, whether as individuals or in society."¹⁵ Though Williams firmly placed lived experience before abstractions, he still held to a high view of reason. Anne Ridler, another poet, felt that in "Charles Williams' universe there is a clear logic, a sense of terrible justice which is not our justice and yet is not divorced from love".

Williams felt passionately that the whole human person must be ordered by reason to have integrity and spiritual health. At the same time, he rejected the idea that what is real should be equated with the abstractions of theoretical

thought. This is why, when he discovered the writings of the nineteenth-century Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard, he was deeply attracted to them. Kierkegaard put actual human existence before concepts about mankind that come from vast philosophical or scientific systems, and felt that individuals disappeared in such accounts of reality. Kierkegaard's views had had a huge impact on the continent, but Charles Williams was to introduce him to the English-speaking world through his influence as a senior editor at OUP. *The Present Age* (1940) would be the first of a number of published translations of Kierkegaard's writings, and carried an introduction by Williams.

Charles's feeling for the importance of human lived experience was expressed most of all, however, by his fervent commitment to romanticism. His attachment to it is expressed in the central place he gives to what he called "images" (or symbols). His concern was particularly with the experience of romantic love, and the theological implications of human love as an image pointing far beyond itself, as C.S. Lewis pointed out in his Introduction to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*.

When, later in his marriage, Charles developed a second love, for a librarian working for OUP called Phyllis Jones, he took that experience seriously. As is to be expected, this caused strain in his marriage and could have ruined it, though in its final years there appears to have been something of a mature return to his first happiness with Florence, captured in his huge body of wartime letters to her. This was despite his master-acolyte relationship with another young female follower, the writer Lois Lang-Sims (who felt more for him than he did for her).

He never abandoned his commitment to Florence, but he used the experience of loving Phyllis Jones to explore

romantic love in literature, and to energize his creativity.¹⁶ He found romantic love, in all its theological implications, given voice in the poetry of Dante, such as *La Vita Nova* (*The New Life*, published about 1292) and in *The Divine Comedy*, which the Italian began composing around 1307. Charles wrote much about the love of Dante for Beatrice, whom the Italian poet momentarily encountered in a street in Florence in the thirteenth century. Charles also explored romantic love through his later poetry and in his novels. It is not surprising that he was so delighted with C.S. Lewis's exploration of medieval courtly love in *The Allegory of Love*, which was going through the press at OUP, leading to his "fan" letter to Lewis in 1936.

This was the fallible man and Christian mystic with a rapturous imagination who appears to hold at least part of the secret of what might have kept the Inklings together as a group, if they were indeed more than simply a circle of Lewis's friends. In their shared interest in human experiences that symbolically pointed beyond the world, were they in fact some kind of contemporary manifestation of the historic Romantic Movement? Were the likes of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley their forerunners? Certainly, Charles Williams was to have an enormous impact upon both C.S. Lewis's thinking and his writing. How Charles affected the group of friends when he joined them in Oxford at the outbreak of war must await a later chapter.