



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 1
Issue 17

Article 1

July 1985

Links of the Inklings

Ruth James Cording

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Recommended Citation

Cording, Ruth James (1985) "Links of the Inklings," *Mythcon Proceedings*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 17 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythpro/vol1/iss17/1>

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Abstract

A brief introduction to the main Inklings and their meetings—Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams.

Keywords

Inklings

LINKS OF THE INKLINGS

Ruth James Cording

Imagine, if you will, a Thursday evening - almost any Thursday evening in the late 1920's, 1930's and early '40's. It is raining. The wind is blustering. It is Thursday night in Oxford, England and the place is Magdalen College. Magdalen clock strikes nine-thirty.

Through the gate, past the porter, down the winding walk, across the grass and into the cloisters, a man walks rapidly. He hurries up the stairs of New Buildings to C.S.Lewis's rooms where a bright fire is burning. Several are already there: J.R.R.Tolkien is sitting in a worn, but comfortable arm-chair, smoking his pipe. Dr. Havard, their physician, is seated in the middle of the wide chesterfield sofa. Lewis's brother Warren is making tea for them all, while C.S. or "Jack" as they call him, is laughing heartily at a witty remark from Hugh Dyson, English Tutor at Merton College. Charles Williams enters breathlessly, coming late from a lecture. Jack welcomes him warmly. To those gathered there, Williams coming is like a benediction.

These are The Inklings - a homogeneous group of friends and writers, intellectually equal, but with many variables. Not until long afterwards would they truly recognize the amazing effects that their meeting had on one another.

"Theoretically" wrote Lewis "we met to talk about literature, but in fact nearly always to talk about something better. Is any pleasure on earth so great" he asked "as a circle of Christian friends by a good fire? These are the golden sessions when the whole world and something beyond the world opens itself to our minds as we talk".

Certainly no woman entered this strictly male balliwick. Nor would she have been welcomed! And I am even awed to read about it. Indeed, they met around the very table which now stands in The Marion E. Wade Collection in the Library at Wheaton College. Our students and many researchers seem to draw inspiration while studying at that old, six by four foot ^{OAK} table.

C.S.Lewis had a passion for hearing things read aloud and the ability to give extempore criticism. Tolkien's Hobbit was read aloud; Williams' All Hallows' Eve and Lewis's Perelandra. The problems of narrative were constantly before their minds as each chapter was read, as soon as it was finished.

Lewis had met Tolkien at a Faculty Meeting in Merton College in the mid '20's, whereupon he wrote to Arthur Greeves, his lifelong friend in Ireland: "The Anglo-Saxon professor at Merton, J.R.R.Tolkien, is the one man absolutely fitted to be a third in our friendship of the old days. He shares our love of Northernness. We have sat discoursing of the gods and giants of Asgard for hours." Later Lewis wrote to Greeves "What I owe to The Inklings is incalculable. Dyson and Tolkien were the immediate causes of my own conversion. I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ - in Christianity. My talk with Tolkien and Dyson late into the night of September 19, 1931 had a good deal to do with it. What had held me back was a difficulty in knowing what the doctrine meant. The whole doctrine of Redemption. How the life of Someone Else 2000 years ago could help us here and now. If I met the idea of sacrifice in a pagan story, I didn't mind at all. Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth-- with the

difference that it really happened. Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things': the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection."

Tolkien was so interested in Lewis's conversion on that night that he set down his own account in a long poem called MYTHOPOEIA. Tolkien later read aloud from The Silmarillion and Lewis urged him to press on and finish writing it. As for The Lord of The Rings, Lewis called it "real stuff" -- and "the glorious sea of Tolkien - nearly as long as the Bible and not a word too long", written by a great philologist, a very great man and a Christian".

Charles Williams and Lewis became acquainted in 1936 by exchanged letters: Charles admiring The Allegory of Love and Lewis favoring Williams' novel The Place of The Lion. When war broke out in 1939, Williams, who worked for Oxford University Press, was moved with the rest of the staff from London to Oxford and thus was recruited into the group of friends - The Inklings. Now the focus of Lewis's enthusiasm shifted almost imperceptibly from Tolkien to Williams. "He is a lovely creature" he wrote "and I'm proud of being among his friends. He has an almost oriental richness of imagination and his address most of all overflows with love.¹ It is simply irresistible. Whether in private or in a lecture he is transfigured and looks like an angel. He sweeps some people quite off their feet. In spite of his angelic quality, he is quite an earthy person; and when Warnie, Tolkien and I met in a pub in Broad Street, the fun was so great and furious that the company probably thought we were talking bawdy when in fact we were very likely talking Theology."

Tolkien described Williams as "A comet that appeared out of the blue, passed through the little 'provincial' Oxford solar system, and went out again into the unknown".²

And what did Williams think of these friends? To his wife he wrote: "I have read some of my book to CSL and Tolkien who admire and approve. Lewis also told me of a pupil's enjoyment of my lectures and poetry (said that it was better than T.S. Elliott's.)"³

In age, these three men were six years apart. Williams being the oldest and C.S.Lewis the youngest.

In 1945 when Charles Williams died, Lewis wrote "No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed." In his poem beginning "Your death blows a strange bugle call", Lewis ends: "Of whom now can I ask guidance? What friend concerning your death is it worth while to exchange thoughts unless---oh, unless it were you?"

When Lewis died in 1963, Tolkien wrote to his daughter Priscilla: "So far I have felt the normal feelings of a man of my age (71) - like an old tree losing all its leaves one by one. But this feels like an axe-blow near the roots."

These, the three best-known of The Inklings, were thus linked not only in Oxford, but incredibly here at Wheaton! Twenty years ago our Collection was begun with seven letters received by Dr. Clyde Kilby from C.S.Lewis. The contact came as a result of Dr. Kilby's presentation of Lewis's books in the English classes. Later he was to meet Lewis, visit at The Kilns and become a good friend of Warren Lewis. He also spent a summer with Tolkien, in their mutual hope for

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the completion of The Silmarillion. A friendship was established also with Mrs. Charles Williams and her son Michael, enabling the Collection to purchase letters and manuscripts.

Now The Wade Collection has some 1500 of C.S.Lewis's original letters and copies of some 500 more which are in The Bodleian Library at Oxford. From here, there and everywhere these letters have come - by gift and request; by discovery and purchase. Books and letters too of the other authors. Some 3000 books in the various editions. Included are the works of Owen Barfield who lives in Kent, England, formerly Lewis's solicitor. Also the writings of Dorothy L. Sayers; G.K.Chesterton; and George MacDonald. Links within links - a veritable golden chain of good things.

"A remarkable testament to Christian Publication" wrote one researcher, acknowledging the time spent in The Wade Collection, adding " I hope the writers of this generation make note and learn from such worthy examples."

If you travel to Oxford, you may wish to visit Charles Williams' grave. It is in the center of Oxford by St. Cross Church. Tolkien's stone is in the Catholic area beyond the ring road, and we note that after his name is the name "Beren", who was the hero and elf-friend in THE LORD OF THE RINGS. And not far from The Kilns where Lewis lived, he is buried in the churchyard of Headington parish. Once laying flowers there on his grave, in gratitude for what his writings and his life has meant to me, as well as to my husband and each of my children, I read the quotation "Men must endure their going hence". We do endure, but with enriched expectation.

Russ James Cording
July 26, 1985
Wheaton, Illinois