



Written by [James Heiser](#) on December 21, 2015

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The “Inklings” — Providing Hope Against a Culture of Despair

The grand sweep of history is often presented as an account of nations and even entire civilizations upon which the religious beliefs and ideologies of different ages have their impress on vast and faceless multitudes. Nearly lost in that vast expanse of time are the moments in which the individuals who shape the character of their ages are brought to the convictions that order their existence.



One such moment occurred as three men walked together and debated long into the night on September 19, 1931. The content of their conversation — the nature of myth and its relationship to Christianity — might seem abstract or at least “academic,” but the outcome of that conversation had profound significance for countless numbers of Christians for decades to come, for it was the night when J.R.R. Tolkien (shown on right) finally broke through C.S. Lewis’ (left) passionately argued opposition to Christianity. As Philip and Carol Zaleski report the encounter in their recent book, *The Fellowship*:

Lewis insisted that myths are essentially lies; Tolkien countered that myths are essentially true, for they reflect and transmit, in secondary form, the primary and primordial creative power of God....

Moreover, Tolkien argues — and this was the crux of the matter — that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we discover a myth that has entered history. Here God tells — indeed, enacts — a tale with all the beauty and wonder and symbolic power of myth, and yet a tale that is actually true. It was a strange thought, but it reminded Lewis of an off-hand remark he had heard five years before from the atheist Harry Weldon. “Rum thing,” Weldon had said, “All that stuff of [James] Frazier’s about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened once.” It looked as if it had really happened once — and yet it lost none of its mythic power for having become fact.

The realization of Christianity as the “myth that became fact” overcame Lewis’ long-held opposition to the faith. According to Lewis, approximately a week later, as he rode with his brother to the Whipsnade Zoo, the full import of the conversation crystalized in faith: “When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.”

The change in Lewis was nothing less than miraculous. Lewis had been a particularly strident atheist in his youth, and although time and experience had blunted the severity of his anti-Christian sentiment, he had seemed an unlikely candidate for becoming one of the most widely read proponents of the Christian verity. However, following his conversion, Lewis, knowing the weaknesses in the arguments of the atheists, turned his wit and intellect to a defense of the faith, writing such classics of Christian apologetics as *The Abolition of Man* (1943), *Mere Christianity* (1944), and his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* (1955). Lewis demonstrated his capacity for setting forth the faith by means of popular fiction, as well, writing his Narnia books and “Space Trilogy” (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and



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That Hideous Strength) as further outlets for discussing the faith by means of allegory.

The significance of Lewis' conversion was not limited to his own writing and his influence as a speaker; rather, he and Tolkien established a literary circle that helped to influence an entire generation of English writers and defenders of the Christian verity: a group of writers remembered as the Inklings.

The Group, the Plan

Attempts to describe the nature of the Inklings revolve around the common commitment of its informal membership to the pursuit of literary endeavors. C.S. Lewis' brother, Warren, described the group as "neither a club nor a literary society, though it partook of the nature of both." Tolkien said that the name was "a pleasantly ingenious pun ... suggesting people with vague or half-formed intimations and ideas plus those who dabble in ink." However, such descriptions belie the significance of the Inklings' collective achievements. Numerous biographers have recounted the lives and literary endeavors of the men who made up the ranks of the Inklings, and several extensive accounts of the group as a whole have been published, beginning with Humphrey Carter's 1978 book, *The Inklings*. The most recent addition to the scholarly examinations of the Inklings is *The Fellowship — The Literary Lives of the Inklings* by Philip and Carol Zaleski. The authors of *The Fellowship* capture the sense of moral purpose and commitment to a vigorous defense of the Western tradition that animated the Inklings: They were, in many cases, survivors of the battlefields of the First World War and understood the measure of what was at stake in their generation:

The Inklings were, to a man ... comrades who had been touched by war, who viewed life through the lens of war, yet who looked for hope and found it, in fellowship, where so many other modern writers and intellectuals saw only broken narratives, disfigurement, and despair.

... Far from breaking with tradition, they understood the Great War and its aftermath in the light of tradition, believing, as did their literary and spiritual ancestors, that ours is a fallen world yet not a forsaken one. It was a belief that set them at odds with many of their contemporaries, but kept them in the broad currents of the English literary heritage.

Approximately two dozen men are counted among the ranks of the informal group, but John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973), Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), Charles Williams (1886-1945), and Owen Barfield (1898-1997) are always identified as the quartet at its heart, with Lewis and Tolkien providing its motive force. (It is worth noting, at least in passing, that membership in the Inklings was exclusively male. Thus, for example, although Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957) was known and respected by many of the Inklings for her efforts as a poet and Christian apologist, even she was not invited into their ranks.) Already in 1927 and 1928, Lewis, Tolkien, and Barfield had begun meeting regularly in Lewis' quarters at Magdalen College. In time, meetings of the Inklings were divided between the more formal gatherings in Lewis' quarters on Thursday evenings, and the informal gatherings at the Eagle and Child pub midday on Tuesday.

Efforts to describe the nature of the Inklings have been proven to be more difficult than one might otherwise anticipate. The Zaleskis quote John Wain (one of the Oxford students to whom Lewis had been tutor) as having described the Inklings as "a circle of instigators, almost of incendiaries, meeting to urge one another on in the task of redirecting the whole current of contemporary art and life," but the Zaleskis themselves focus on what the Inklings have become: "Whatever the Inklings may have been



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during their most clubbable years, today they constitute a major literary force, a movement of sorts. As symbol, inspiration, guide, and rallying cry, the Inklings gain more influence each year.” The Inklings lived in a time defined by war: Many of them were veterans of the “War to End All Wars” who went on to serve in a variety of capacities during the Second World War, but their primary endeavor in life was to bequeath to their civilization a collection of literary works that opposed the ideological spirits of the age. In the words of *The Fellowship*:

Nonetheless, the Inklings were anything but monolithic. Even in the early years, the club embraced a variety of professions, including don, doctor, lawyer, and soldier; the popular image of the Inklings as sequestered academics is clearly inadequate. The members’ shared Christianity also included a wide spectrum of views. Tolkien was Catholic; Barfield, Anthroposophist; Lewis, a “mere Christian”; Charles Williams, Anglican with a dash of ritual magic. Differences notwithstanding, the members were glued together by shared adherence to the Nicene Creed (with Barfield a possible exception until the late 1940s) and a shared set of enemies, including atheists, totalitarians, modernists, and anyone with a shallow imagination. Above all, they were friends, encouraging, provoking, enlightening, and correcting one another.

In opposing the violent lies promulgated by various ideologies, the Inklings were of a common spirit with the sentiment that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn would express in 1972 in his *Nobel Lecture*:

We shall be told: What can literature do in the face of a remorseless assault of open violence? But let us not forget that violence does not and cannot exist by itself: It is invariably intertwined with *the lie*.... Anyone who has once proclaimed violence as his *method* must inexorably choose the lie as his - *principle*....

The simple act of an ordinary brave man is not to participate in lies, not to support false actions! His rule: Let *that* come into the world, let it even reign supreme — only not through me. But it is within the power of writers and artists to do much more: *to defeat the lie!*

The Inklings were a circle of men of a shared vision: They set out to defeat the lie. Through works of fiction, they sought to tell the truth — even while the purveyors of ideologies in Berlin and Moscow spread lies with deadly fervor. Rarely is an author as explicit in such an intent as when Tolkien, speaking through the voice of Samwise Gamgee, declares in *The Two Towers*:

The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually — their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on — and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same — like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren’t always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?

Samwise’s words confront the reader with the same sort of questions: “What sort of tale am I in? And how would others view the way I am fulfilling my part in the tale?”



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By the same measure, C.S. Lewis offered an example of the way in which those who have chosen violence as their method choose the lie as their principle when, in his greatest novel, *That Hideous Strength*, he presents the agents of a dark conspiracy manufacturing fraudulent news stories for the purpose of manipulating public opinion. In the critical scene, a modern “intellectual” named Mark Studdock is required to produce fake stories of a riot in order to form the basis for the government declaring a state of emergency. Studdock asks, “But how are we to write it tonight if the thing doesn’t even happen till tomorrow at the earliest?”

Everyone burst out laughing.

“You’ll never manage publicity that way, Mark,” said Feverstone. “You surely don’t need to wait for a thing to happen before you tell the story of it!” ...

This was the first thing Mark had been asked to do which he himself, before he did it, clearly knew to be criminal. But the moment of his consent almost escaped his notice; certainly, there was no struggle, no sense of turning a corner. There may have been a time in the world’s history when such moments fully revealed their gravity, with witches prophesying on a blasted heath or visible Rubicons to be crossed. But, for him, it all slipped past in a chatter of laughter, of that intimate laughter between fellow professionals, which of all earthly powers is strongest to make men do very bad things before they are yet, individually, very bad men.

The Interactions

Meetings of the Inklings were the location where such novels found their first audience. The members of this circle knew that they would receive what could be a brutally frank assessment of their efforts — but they also knew that they would receive encouragement, as well. As the Zaleskis observe:

Out of the Silent Planet might have been stillborn without Tolkien’s intervention; so, too, *The Lord of the Rings*, but for the persistent support and timely critiques of Lewis and others. Both Lewis and Tolkien acknowledged a debt to Owen Barfield’s *Poetic Diction*; and while Lewisian traces in Williams’s books may be more elusive than the Williamsesque motifs that saturate *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis’s encouragement buoyed Williams tremendously.

Unlike Tolkien and Lewis, Charles Williams was not primarily an academic. Instead, he spent nearly his entire professional life working for Oxford University Press. However, like many of his fellow Inklings, Williams’ passion was for his literary endeavors. Of these published works, several of his novels — including *War in Heaven*, *The Place of the Lion*, and *All Hallows’ Eve* — remain the best-known of his writings. Undeniably, Williams’ novels are darker in character than any of the writings of Lewis and Tolkien, and the occult often figured prominently in his tales. Although, like Lewis, Williams was a member of the Anglican Church, his interest in the occult caused tension between him and Tolkien. As the Zaleskis noted:

Nonetheless, Tolkien enjoyed Williams’s company and valued his critical acumen. During the war, he wrote a poem that reveals, if not his deepest feelings about Williams, at least those he was willing to express; in it he calls Williams “dearest Charles” and lauds his “subtle mind,” his “virtues,” and his “wisdom.” ... But mutual affability notwithstanding, Tolkien disdained Williams’s literary works, declaring in 1965 that he found them “wholly alien, and sometimes very distasteful, occasionally ridiculous.” Whence the antipathy? Distrusting Williams’s penchant for magic, he [Tolkien] may have



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suspected (correctly) that behind these plot devices lay personal occult experience kept strictly hidden from the Inklings.

The sudden death of Charles Williams in 1945 — only days after Victory in Europe Day — changed the character of the Inklings from that point onward, but it did not shake their faith. In the words of C.S. Lewis, “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 changed.”

Among the Inklings, it was Owen Barfield who was the first to publish a work of fiction — *The Silver Trumpet* — but it would be Lewis and Tolkien who would make names for themselves in this arena. Barfield sought to understand history through the changes in language and the attendant changes “not only in the ideas people have formed about the world, but a change in the very world they experience.” His 1928 work, *Poetic Diction*, would have an influence on the way in which the Inklings understood language; Lewis and Tolkien both acknowledged a profound debt to Barfield. Among the Inklings, it is possible that Barfield had the strongest belief in the transformative power of language within culture, positing that one of the greatest hopes for the future of mankind was found in the realm of the poets.

Defenders of the Christian Faith

The Inklings shared the Christian belief in the power of the Word; for Lewis and Tolkien, in particular, the Word made flesh — Christ Jesus — was the center of their lives, the inspiration for their labors, and their comfort in times of sorrow. Although Lewis is remembered above all as a steadfast defender of the Christian faith, Tolkien’s piety was of a decidedly sacramental character. As Tolkien wrote to his son Michael: “Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament.... There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth.”

The Inklings were the Christian answer to the Enlightenment notion of the “republic of letters”; far from being a scattered assemblage of “philosophes,” the Inklings were united by a common bond of friendship and overlapping visions of the traditions of Christendom and the West restored. As the Zaleskis wrote in *The Fellowship*:

Lewis’s work was all of a piece, as literary scholar, fantasist, and apologist, he was ever on a path of rehabilitation and recovery. Tolkien, like Lewis, claimed to be a living anachronism — “I am in fact a *Hobbit* (in all but size)” — but anyone who troubles to create new languages and surround them with new myths for the sake of reenchanting English literature can hardly be accused of living in the past. In his fiction, Charles Williams reclaimed mysterious, numinous objects — the Holy Grail, the Stone of Suleiman, a Tarot deck, Platonic archetypes — from past epochs and relocated them in modern England to demonstrate the thinness, even today, of the barrier between natural and supernatural.... Owen Barfield excavated the past embedded within language, secreted in the plainest of words, in order illuminate the future of consciousness in all its esoteric, scarcely imaginable glory.

The personal inclinations — even obsessions — of the various members of the Inklings each added facets to the shared endeavor. Men who survived the horrors of two world wars with faith and hope intact strove to impart the traditions of the past to generations that were yet to come. The tragedies of war were framed by the Inklings in the context of a rebirth of hope, particularly in light of Tolkien’s notion of a “eucatastrophe” — a sudden victory of hope in a situation that seemed hopeless:



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The war may have opened a gap between expectation and fulfillment that literature was uniquely prepared to occupy and investigate. Or it may be that the poetry of World War I, at least in its lyrical mode, was itself the last flowering of the Age of Innocence that preceded the war, that the horrors of the trenches sparked this final blossoming, as friction gives rise to fire; that the daily nightmare unfolding before the soldiers sharpened their sense of beauty, prophecy, and mission. If this is so, one may regard the traditionalism of the Inklings, not as a return to the past, but as the past still alive in the present, as the spirit of World War I poetry, the last articulation of ordered innocence, finding new voice amidst the nearly incessant wars of flesh, mind, and spirit that marked the twentieth century.

Though the Inklings have long since returned to dust, their works do follow them, and generations now learn some measure of the traditions of their forefathers through the writings of men who had their hope in the Word made flesh.

Photos at top: C.S. Lewis (left) and J.R.R. Tolkien



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