

## Book Reviews

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*The Inklings and King Arthur: J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, and Owen Barfield on the Matter of Britain*. Edited by Sørina Higgins. (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2017). \$49.99 (paperback), x + 555 pp.

Noting Charles Moorman's *Arthurian Triptych* (1960), Sørina Higgins remarks that, with respect to these "major members" of the Inklings, there "has never been a comprehensive study of their Arthurian works" (2). For those who had been waiting anywhere up to thirty-six years for *The Fall of Arthur* to appear in print—since Humphrey Carpenter's brief, tantalizing summary in *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (1977)—Higgins happily says that, in addition "to serving as the first sizable study of Inklings Arthuriana, this book also aims to be the first full-length, peer-reviewed book to consider" that unfinished long poem as edited by Christopher Tolkien. That consideration is rich, varied, and complementary, whether one thinks of essays focused on it—like those of Cory Grewell (attending to "The Elegiac Fantasy of Past Christendom"), Taylor Driggers (looking at it "as a Post-World War I Text"), or Alyssa House-Thomas's "working version of [her] M.A. thesis" (333) which looks in detail at "Tolkien's Guinever" in comparison to figures in (among others) Celtic sources and "Germanic literature looking backward to the Heroic Age" (346)—or of others works ranging even further in their comparisons, such as Charles Huttar's superb study of "The Idea of Avalon in Inklings Fiction and Poetry."

In one of the seventeen glowing endorsements included, Lyle Dorsett says, "I intend to recommend it to my students" (ii). While not attempting to be an exhaustive overview or *Companion and Guide*, this large book could serve as a thorough 'introductory (and/or refresher) course,' and more, to any interested reader. Contributions to the volume in this respect include not only Higgins's own chapter, featuring lucid overviews of Arthurian works by those four Inklings, and Holly Ordway's fine "Medieval Arthurian Sources for the Inklings: An Overview," but also a fascinating "Inventory of Inklings Arthuriana." It consists of chronological lists with short descriptions of "works by the four major Inklings that engage with the legends of Arthur" (15). Two other contributions which invite mention here are Yannick Imbert's attention to "Inklings Arthuriana in Historical Context" and a chapter by Jason Jewell and Chris Butynskyi on "Spiritual Quest in a Scientific Age."

Of the nineteen contributions by other hands, Higgins notes that, "several chapters are in dialogue with each other, offering variant perspectives on the

same or similar questions" (3). While they have been arranged in five sections, she cheerfully notes that you can read the book "straight through or in an order of your own devising" (7), and the extensive index (333-55) enables easy browsing as well as help in finding things again. Editorial footnotes not infrequently cross-reference the contributions too. Higgins points out that there "are chapters by students and by professors, by both emerging and established scholars" (3), with authors clearly free to write in their own styles. I always found the differing styles approachable, though, so that one can comfortably read the book straight through. The chapters invite rereading. I think they will reward (as they sometimes challenge) close study together with the works discussed. Like the works of the Inklings themselves, the papers here are 'centrifugal', sending the reader out eager to read more—whether works discussed, or numerous scholarly works referenced (in detailed chapter and general bibliographies)—and to think more, ponder further.

Different readers will, of course, experience different 'accents' in this that will encourage further reading and thought. Thanks to various contributors (not least Christopher Gaertner) I am left keen to read more Barfield—and to hope we may before too long experience his *Quest of the Sangreal* (which "was not available to the authors ... while they were writing" (33). Note-worthy, too are contributions about two other of the 'Seven.' These include J. Cameron Moore on Chesterton's Arthurian poems and Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson on "Arthurian Peregrinations in George MacDonald." Ultimately, it is impossible to do justice to the variety and interest of the eighteen contributions in addition to those of Sørina Higgins and Holly Ordway, though it is worth noting that Malcolm Guite's "Conclusion" is gratefully cognizant of all, while it also places its own accents, and then admirably adds to them in its own right.

It should be noted that Sørina Higgins invited me to be available behind the scenes as one of those 'peers' referred to above, and kindly mentions me in the acknowledgements (10). Additionally, while Brenton D.G. Dickieson invited me to be guest editor of a series of posts on his blog, "A Pilgrim in Narnia," welcoming and complementing the appearance of this book, I must be allowed to state how much I enjoyed his "Study of Intertextuality in C.S. Lewis's Ransom Cycle" in this volume. While Sørina Higgins has posted the Table of Contents on her blog, "The Oddest Inkling," on 5 January 2018, Jon Hooper's distinct attention to Narnia "and the World Wars" and Benjamin Shogren's to *That Hideous Strength* and "Lewisian Genders," may be noted, as well as the fact that works by Lewis are featured throughout. Finally, since Williams "wrote by far the largest number of completed, thoroughly Arthurian works of all of the Inklings" (7), five essays are devoted to his works, as well as his numerous 'comparative' appearances in others.

Of this set, Bradley Wells especially considers Williams's first sustained

public Arthurian work, curiously, in amateur theatricals at his office. This is one example of an essay not only rewarding but probably (for the unfamiliar reader) calling for a reading in conjunction with the published works discussed. (It also gives the most detailed, if tantalizing, glimpse I have encountered of unpublished youth work archived at the Wade Center, which might in some ways be compared with Lewis's *Boxen*.) Suzanne Bray gives fine attention in literary and personal context to the Grail novel that Williams wrote before his office plays but only published after, bringing him to wider attention as Arthurian. Andrew Stout elucidates "The Eucharistic Theology of Charles Williams's Arthurian Poetry" not least in "the sacramental context of the Church of England in the early twentieth century" (477) including the architecture and liturgical life of his own parish church. Benjamin Utter and Andrew Rasmussen each consider the Empire in his late Arthurian poetry in distinctly different ways.

The latter gives an example of how contributions can be implicitly in "conversation" (5) and "dialogue with each other"(3), or indeed debate, yet still remain complementary; such as when Rasmussen's and Wells's discussions of "the City" are brought together, and Shogren's and Rasmussen's of 'gender.' While Rasmussen well points out insufficient care in analysis and argumentation by, for example, Dr. Freud Loewenstein, sadly he seems too often abrupt and hasty in his own discussions. Given the weight and difficulty of the matters they are to be commended for tackling, his closing word that, "one should join the discussion and enjoy the journey of *Taliessin*" (384), deserves, and I expect will find, response—especially when extended to Utter's more subtly wrought contribution as well.

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