Chapter One

Williams and the Historical Notion of Kingship

> The single bliss and sole felicity
> The sweet fruition of an earthly crown
> Charles Williams, *Shadows of Ecstasy* (1931), p. 61.

An Inkling

Williams's (1886-1945) ideal king is modelled on Christ the King. Williams's ideal kingly 'type' is, then, a 'mirror' of Christ. Through His sacrifice on the Cross, the suffering servant is the king who "reigned from the tree".[1] Williams's kingly characters 'reflect' Christ's sacrificial Love, *agape*, and also radiates the 'Glory' with which Yahweh "was entering the sanctuary".[2] The Ancient Hebrews had two words and two ideas for 'Glory', the first a shining light, as from a lamp at night, the second a more profound quality that evokes awe.[3] Williams's King leads and protects his people, bringing about conditions conducive to the creation of a peaceful, just and prosperous society. Like Tolkien, Williams's ideal king emulates the Anglo-Saxon *Rex Pacificus* who had "the same responsibility" (as his predecessor, the pagan priest-king) "for bringing 'peace and plenty' to his realm", as achieved by Alfred the Great.[4]

Charles Williams had been born in London and was an Englishman, an Anglican and, albeit with sympathies for republican ideals, a royalist. Alice Mary Hadfield, who worked with him "in the Oxford University Press at Amen House, London, . . . for six years", tells us in *An Introduction to Charles Williams* (1959), that it was in an area that though not "working class" was "drab and dominated by the massive bridge of the railway . . . His father was, like himself later, an ordinary rank-and-file member of a business firm in the City with a taste for literature".

Walter, Charles's father, Hadfield describes as having "always had a sense of helplessness before the economic and social world", in a time when Victorian industry "was suffering the second slump in ten years". This is significant because Walter had lost both his job and the greater part of his sight. The family moved to St. Albans in 1894, where his mother, Mary, took a shop. Williams went of his own volition to the Abbey every week, and he chose

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to read a great deal of Dickens. He won a Junior County Scholarship to St. Albans Grammar School in 1888. In 1901, he obtained a County Scholarship to University College, Gower Street, London, and started there in 1902. His time at University College lasted a mere two years, simply because his parents could not afford to keep him there any longer. He obtained a job "at the Bookroom, in Holborn, in 1904". Hadfield tells us that Williams "had another instinct" that though hidden, showed there was "another world and a deeper struggle". He became aware of his mother's "struggles with money", an awareness that created in him a "sense of guilt".[5] In view of Williams's early life, and the attendant serious stresses caused to his family by ever-present problems over money, it is small wonder that, although he was at heart an Anglican and a royalist, he was eager to see a society that was just, caring and egalitarian, in the way he truly believed was inherent in the ideal of a republic.

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As Williams's model is *Christus Rex*, it is not surprising that Williams regarded the office of the earthly king as sacred, in fact, as a 'spiritual' monarchy. In this, Williams mirrored the Anglo-Saxon idea that as the Old English term *giftstol* means both "king's throne and God's altar", the "person of the ruler . . . was sacred *ex officio*". In the Christian use of the image of the *giftstol*, the "sacred is described . . . in terms of the royal throne instead of the throne in terms of the sacred", the throne of the sacral monarch.[6]

Williams regarded the earthly king as the heavenly king's vicegerent, reflecting another idea of the Anglo-Saxons whose king, like St. Edward the Confessor is "king by the grace of God, *dei vicarius*", and as vicar of God, *ipso facto*, His vicegerent.[7] The ancient Hebrews believed that the king was "the Messiah of Yahweh", the 'anointed one', His vicegerent.[8] Kingship itself "came down from heaven".[9] Williams describes the coronation ceremonies, emphasising in his 'Arthuriad', in the collection of poems, *Arthurian Poets* (ed.1991), the importance of being anointed. The Archbishop anoints King Arthur with oil as Samuel anointed King David. Arthur's kingship is 'willed' by God. In *one* view of the establishment of the kingship among the Ancient Hebrews, in the 'Saul Tradition', the King was "specially commissioned for this high office".[10]

Williams sees a king who, somewhat like the Homeric king, "was at once the chief priest, the chief judge and the supreme war-lord of his people.[11] In his portrayal of King Arthur Williams presents a king who, if not actually chief priest, is the Pendragon, the Chief, the war-leader, who will bring justice and peace to the mythical land of Logres, which is to become the Britain that we know. Williams's ideal king is ready (though not without misgivings) to lead his people in war, even risking his own life for them, to promote peace and prosperity. In the *Arthuriad*, King Arthur is a *dux bellorum*, a war-leader like the Homeric king, a royal function long expected of the "earliest" of kings.[12]

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An inherent part of King Arthur's 'justice' is his freeing of Logres from the tyrant, King Cradlemas, by force, the use of which makes Williams apparently ambivalent. This makes the modern reader uncomfortable. It could be argued that he would have preferred a Platonic republic to a despotic monarchy. Williams, to this extent like the Romans, had an abomination of tyrants, of unjust despots. Arthur's kingship is 'willed' by God. In Williams's *James I*, the King saw *his* kingship as 'willed' by God. He would have abhorred the tyrannical King Tarquin the Proud, the last King of Rome, who was both "ambitious and domineering", and had shown himself guilty of "high-handed tyranny".[13] Aristotle defined tyrants as "men who . . . seized kingship, and perverted it for their own benefit",[14] while the Romans "had a horror of monarchy", because "the word *Rex*" suggested "myths of tyranny and enslavement".[15] The Greek word *týrannos* had once meant 'king' or 'sovereign'; but came to have the connotation of tyrant.

Sophocles' *Œdipus Rex* translates the Greek 'Œdipus' as 't*ýrannos*'. Not originally meant in a 'pejorative' sense, it was "properly used of revolutionary despots". It would have been applicable to Cromwell, Napoleon, Stalin, or Idi Amin, but not to even the most blood-thirsty of hereditary kings".[16] Williams shows a profound desire to create the vision of a kingdom that engenders a truly just society. His envisaged king, whose office is holy, will earnestly strive to create a society that evinces the egalitarian qualities of a Republic. He is not even averse to an actual republic, although he remains at heart a royalist. The king, reflecting Christ, is there to serve his people, rather than to be served by them. This inclusive attitude in Williams calls to mind observations about sixteenth and seventeenth-century "royalist writers, whether in France or England", who had "no quarrel with other forms of government, when once established, whether elective monarchies or republics".[17]

Williams's magnanimous overarching perspective concerning right governance is echoed in John Buchan's *The Path of the King* (1921). Having eulogised the late President Lincoln, Buchan's Mr Lovell said as the coffin passed him: "There goes the first American", to which Mr Hamilton replied, "I dare say you are right, Professor, but I think it is also the last of the Kings".[18] Buchan, having seen a king-like quality in a republican President, said conversely in *The King's Grace* (1910-35), "Majesty and Grace are in the royal office. Monarchy in some form is universal". Speaking of King George V, Buchan said, "The King has led his people [as Buchan felt true of President Lincoln], for he has evoked what is best in them".[19]

Questing for an ideal society, Williams presents Logres as a kingdom which owed allegiance to the mythical Emperor of Byzantium. This Emperor, Lewis posits, symbolises God. Imperial authority, Dante insisted, emanates directly from God Himself. Nevertheless, Williams said in *The Descent of the Dove* (1939), "It is at least arguable that the Christian Church will have to return to a pre-Constantine state before she can properly recover the ground she too quickly won".[20]

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Williams, with enthusiasm for the egalitarian qualities of a republic, makes it clear that the king has both to be just himself, not to use his kingdom for his own ends but also, as judge, to dispense justice. Williams reflects a Platonic ideal, that justice must be seen to be good *per se*, and this simply because it is morally right. His idea of royal justice stems from God's Justice, from Yahweh, who is just and dispenses justice. "Justice was of God and it seemed therefore best delivered by those most familiar with the holy sphere. . . . The king is the supreme judge".[21] The Hebrew King, God's Vicegerent, was responsible for the "administration of justice within his realm".[22] Williams is wary of the possession of royal power which, if used in extreme self-interest, is highly dangerous. Power is really safe only in God's hands, those of the Divine King, who overcame the "Chaos Powers".[23] Christ, the King of Love, used His royal power selflessly, and thus, very differently "from those who in days of old had been symbolically anointed".[24] Williams exemplified in his work the danger of misuse of royal power when King James I believed his Prerogative should not even be *discussed*.

James's exigency is only too reminiscent of Richard II's unshakeable belief in Divine Right, and *his* preoccupying "emphasis on the prerogative".[25] There is something of Emperor Augustus' 'restoration of peace' in Williams's ambition to have an 'ordered' society, the antithesis of a land without the 'form' of a Republic. Williams exhorted right use of royal Power, making it inherent in the symbolic bond between King Arthur's kingdom and the mythical Emperor of Byzantium – symbolising God. Developing classical ideals, where individuals should 'function' *pro bono publico*, Williams advocates the Christian principle that will achieve the Order he looks for in society. It will, he believes, be brought about by what he calls 'Co-inherence' when people, from the King down, live as "members one of another",[26] a Pauline doctrine arguably more profound than even equality.

Williams regarded a Christian kingdom as the kind of society where each member carries out their peculiar 'function' for the good of all. Williams saw a paradigm in Plato's ideal Republic, where justice is believed to be morally right. He prefers a freely made compact to a legally enforced contract. The king (or president) exercises his authority for the benefit of all, an idea encouraged by Socrates. The previously un-tamed land of Logres is established as a Christian kingdom when King Arthur has been anointed and crowned. Williams believed that once crowned, the King is Majesty, as he felt that King James I assumed. Williams saw 'Mystery' in contemporary monarchs, seeing a parallel between the spiritual monarchy of King George VI and the mythical Pendragon, King Arthur.

The King's Sacral Office and the Matter of Britain

Williams's most profound view of kingship is found in his treatment of the 'figure of Arthur' in two sequences of poems, *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944). Williams convincingly portrays

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an organic fusion of apparently contradictory concepts, Sacral Monarchy and the Republic. He had made a real contribution to the expression of his concept of kingship in his early poetry, where the emphasis was on the divine king. He saw a direct connection between romantic love and the experience of that love which itself actually *is* God; and in Christ's kingship a coherence of both His love and His glory. *The Silver Stair* in particular illuminates Williams's ideal of divine kingship. However, the main focus will be on the *Arthuriad*.

Williams's *archetypal* king is Christ, the essential idea of whose kingship is twofold, a unity of self-sacrificial Love and kingly Glory. He saw in the Godhead a co-inhering trinity of persons who live in eternal reciprocity of love, who live *in* and *for* each other and who are, at the same time, *one* God. In the earthly king, especially in Britain, Williams finds a spiritual, in fact a Christian king, whose task is to enable the people to be a cohesive and just society. The king is the 'mirrored image', or perhaps the vicegerent, of the heavenly King, who will lead and protect his people, engendering peace and justice. Williams, drawing a distinction between the monarch *qua* monarch and as a private person, saw mystery in the monarch, whose office is holy: its fulfilment is his function as a private person.

Williams looked for equality in society. This indicates an egalitarian outlook that extends even to the king who, as a type of Christ, is there to serve his people, rather than the converse. He expected to find in a Christian monarchy the same quality he saw in his idea of a republic, where all co-inhere as equals. Williams's distinctive ideals are encapsulated in the *Arthuriad*, in which King Arthur the Pendragon, the leader or chief, is himself a pattern of sacral monarchy. Williams was not only recounting the Arthurian myths in a manner congenial to him, exploring the early British monarchy, but to obtain deeper understanding of its meaning in his own day, especially the reign of King George VI. That is to say, Williams saw in Arthur the epitome of a just, heroic king, faithful to his people, who maintains their well-being, a father to the nation, a generous, patient and temperate monarch, and a Christian withal. Williams's writing is still pertinent to the 'Matter of Britain' in the twenty-first century, enhancing greater awareness of the essentially spiritual nature of the monarchy of Queen Elizabeth II.

The twentieth century was an era somewhat atheistic and anti-monarchic, especially in intellectual circles, with regard to religious and political matters. The exceptions were, perhaps, during the reign of the genuinely devout King George VII, and especially during the war, when the people 'turned to God'. To an extent in opposition to the beliefs of his day, or to the lack of them, Williams creates in King Arthur an image, or type, of an earthly monarch who mirrors or reflects the heavenly King. He is God's vicegerent on earth, the very God in whom Arthur and Williams believe. In this spiritual monarchy, he portrays the creation of a potentially ideal society (the Christian kingdom of Logres before it became merely

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Britain). He sees this kingdom as being just one part, the head, as of a body, and therefore the mind, of the much larger Byzantium. The independent, loving relationships between the different parts of the Empire, for instance Logres and Byzantium, are modelled on the Trinity.

Williams made a detailed study of the legends from as early as 1908. He made careful notes on the Arthurian theme in his *Commonplace Book*. In 1908, a significant year for Williams, he both fell in love with Florence Conway, who he married in 1917, and also became convinced of the inherent truths and the scope for poetry to be found in the Arthurian legends and Grail myths.[27] Since then, he had written poems on the legends in *Heroes and Kings*, published privately in 1930 and *Three Plays* in 1931.

Williams attaches considerable importance to the figure of the king in the actual history behind the legends, being eager to give his poetic treatment 'depth' and verisimilitude. He looks to the sixth-century historian and monk Gildas for the history of the Britons since the coming of the Romans, and to the ninth-century Welsh monk Nennius, whom he quotes: "Arthur fought with the Saxons, alongside the kings of the Britons, but was himself the leader in the battles".[28] Williams based his own version of the Arthurian myths on that of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, printed by Caxton in 1485. This was itself based on various French and English versions of the legends, including four by Chrétien de Troyes (written in the second half of the 12th century), the *Roman de Brut* (1155), the *Vulgate Cycle* (1225-56) and *Morte Arthure* (early fifteenth century) among others. Williams was considerably influenced by some of the Victorian poets, in particular Tennyson, Swinburne, William Morris and Hawker of Morwenstow. A source, perhaps Williams's earliest, is the Victorian novelist, poet and essayist Thomas L. Peacock and his *The Misfortunes of Elphin* – the Elphin who found Taliessin in a "leathern bag".[29] The writing of the Taliessin poems began with "certain things in Malory".[30] Williams expresses a "vague disappointment" with the way in which "Tennyson treated the Hallows of the grail in Balin and Balan". Williams is not attacking Tennyson as a poet, but feels that "in this particular respect his treatment of the Sacred Lance as a jumping-pole left a good deal to be desired." Williams defends his position when he pleads that he is not claiming to be better than Tennyson", and also that the "great and awful myth of the Grail had not been treated adequately in English verse".[31] Williams believed that "the only English poets who have spoken almost worthily" of "Merlin" are Tennyson and Swinburne, and of the two Swinburne is for once the greater".[32]

Williams considers that the matter of Britain begins with the "freeing of Logres (or Britain) from the pagans and tyrants", which leads to the coronation of the king. What ought not to happen, "and what in Malory and Tennyson is already an almost minor episode, is his "war against the Emperor . . . All that Tennyson says is that "Arthur strove with Rome". Williams pointed out that the Grail had been an episode, but could no longer be accidentally so. Tennyson thought the Grail was "only for

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certain people, and he modified the legend accordingly". Williams felt that "Tennyson, in that sense, was right; he meant to make the Grail an episode, and he did". But "it is not, as in Tennyson, only for the elect; it is for all".[33] Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1856-85) and Williams's *Arthuriad* were similarly written without an overall narrative, and were related in episodes. Williams saw relevance for the times of King George VI in his recounting of the tales.

Tennyson went further and not only dedicated his *Idylls* to the memory of the Prince Consort, Prince Albert, and presented them to Queen Victoria, but he also explicitly said she would find there "some image of himself", that is, he saw King Arthur in the Prince Consort. When Tennyson presented this poem to his Queen, Victoria was ruler over the world's greatest empire. "There is implicit in the poem a warning that even the perfect King and the perfect Kingdom cannot survive the loss of faith".[34] Williams believed that "Tennyson was really writing (and very properly) a modern moral story, as he said he was. He could not – he did not even try to – get the Myth . . . The poet who, in an occasional touch, gets nearest to the tone of the Myth is Swinburne".[35]

In creating his kingly type, the great importance Williams attaches to the actual figure, or office of the king is seen in emphatic statements in "The Coming of the Grail" in *The Figure of Arthur*:

> It is to the French poets and romancers that we owe the bringing of this high myth into relation with Arthur, King of Britain or Logres, as it is to Geoffrey of Monmouth that we owe the development of the figure of Arthur the king out of the doubtful records of the Captain-General of Britain; and as we owe to Sir Thomas Malory the most complete version of the whole in the English language . . . It is perhaps worthwhile to reshape the whole tale here once more.[36]

In an unpublished letter of 9 November 1916 to Alice Meynell, Williams wrote, "If *you* say that Tennyson is final, I will drop the idea at once. But perhaps . . . Why were Tennyson and Patmore both so monarchical and Tory – not so much in direct politics as in idea? It seems strange that they were neither moved by the great drama of the Republic".[37] Lewis remembered Williams describing the growth of the legend in his mind and its form in his poems, and was to have in his "unwritten poems",[38] those he *intended* to write but never did. With the republicanism Williams expressed to Meynell, it is notable that in *The Figure of Arthur* (1945) he wrote, "But we cannot go behind the royalty invented. No one can ever uncrown Arthur. The king may have – indeed must have – the qualities of the Captain-General, but he must be the king".[39] In *The Calling of Taliessin* (1944), Williams looks back to the Old Welsh poem, the *Mabinogion*, and describes the land called Logres as disordered, with its kings at war. Taliessin finds a land without 'form': it has no 'public thing', no *res publica*. It is not a republic, an ordered State. For Williams, a president or a king may rule it, as long as its society is just, for as Rousseau says, "All legitimate government is republican".[40]

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Co-inherence in the Kingdom: the Republic

Williams regards a Christian kingdom as a society where all fulfil their 'function' for the general good as a 'republic', and where everyone is an integral part of the body politic. This ideal of Society, the *res publica* is Platonic. In the *Republic*, justice is seen to be good for its own sake. To avoid wrong or injury, Plato says, "It will pay to make a compact with each other by which they forgo both",[41] a statement that anticipates the Social Contract of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Williams, like Plato, draws a continual analogy between the State and the human person, and in Williams's case, perhaps with the nature of the universe as well. Williams says, "a man is a small replica of the universe . . . 'a little world'".[42] Sympathetic to Plato's ideal, Williams exhorts each member of society to fulfil his or her 'function' for the good of all; and encapsulates this decree in a quotation from his book *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study of Dante* (1943) – "The proper operation (working or function) is not in existence for the sake of the being, but for the sake of the operation".[43]

Williams places this same quotation at the beginning of the two cycles of Arthurian poems, which is significant. Dante's injunction applies as much to the king as to everyone else, perhaps especially to the king and his 'function' on account of his great power. Williams sees in fulfilling one's 'function' the Pauline notion of living as "members one of another". He calls it 'Co-inherence' – living in-and-for each other. Co-inherence applies both to the people *and* to the king, from whom it spreads out like a vine. He people will endeavour to emulate the Christ-like inter-personal love that Williams sees existing between the Persons of the Holy Trinity.[44] Williams is aware of two types of society, that is, with and without co-inherence. In *The Calling of Taliessin* we are shown a land where it does not *yet* operate, a land where there is still a great deal of the in-fighting so graphically expressed by the sixth-century *historic* Taliesin (who before Tennyson had no second 's'),[45] in his elegy to Owain, the son of King Urien of Rheged. It displays a harsh atmosphere, including a sinister play on the word 'sleep'.

When Owain killed Ffamddwyn
it was no more
to him
than to sleep.
The great host of Lloegr
sleep with a glaze in their eyes.[46]

Williams shows a society, if indeed it is as yet a 'society', in which Man lived. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) would have dismissed it simply as "a state of nature, before there is any government". Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) points out that Hobbes's view is that "every man desires to preserve his own liberty, but to acquire dominion over others; both these desires are dictated by the impulse to self-preservation". From continual conflict arises a state of war against all, which makes life, in Hobbes's brief description,

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"nasty, brutish and short". To escape from such "evils", Hobbes suggests gathering each subject into a central authority by means of a "social contract". The people would come together and choose a "sovereign, or a sovereign body". Russell says that "Hobbes prefers monarchy, but all his abstract arguments are equally applicable to all forms of government in which there is one supreme authority not limited by the legal rights of other bodies".[47] Such is one view of the causes of Taliessin's 'wild land'. Williams, though, saw vicious, self-seeking aggression as the result of the historic Fall of Man, his Primal Curse. For Williams, there was only one satisfactory answer to the tragedy of Man, he must be reconciled to his Creator.

Williams saw reconciliation being made available through the Holy Eucharist, through the Body and Blood of Christ, which he symbolised as the Holy Grail. Williams said later in "The Cross" in *The Image of the City* (1943) that, on the Cross, Christ had

> substituted Himself for us. He submitted in our stead to the full results of the Law which is He . . . By that central substitution, which was the thing added by the Cross to the Incarnation. He became everywhere the centre of, and everywhere He energised and reaffirmed, all our substitutions and exchanges.[48]

Williams emphasises the vital actions of Christ, whose self-sacrificial love necessarily preceded the return of His glory. In "The Redeemed City" in *The Image of the City*, Williams said that after His substitution of Himself for Man, He asked the disciples whether Christ "*ought* not to have suffered these things" before entering into His glory? He then celebrated for them the great exchange of the Eucharist – "and vanished". Very pertinently he added, "It was by an act of substitution that He renewed the City; this He had commanded as the order in both nature and grace".[49]

It is hardly surprising, then, that Williams was keen not only to recount the legend of King Arthur as Malory told it, but also to give due attention to the Grail element. It is through Christ that Williams sees the ultimate redemption and *renewal* not only of 'the City', his figure for all society, but of Logres and the country of Britain it would become.

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