In Charles Williams: The Third Inkling, Grevel Lindop has written a page-turner. He proves himself a master of the biographical narrative. He knows how to end chapters and sections of chapters with cliffhangers. He liberally employs the ironic slant, and he has an eye for visuals. Lindop's preface, a model of balanced prose, sets the volume's tone. From the beginning, he signals that he intends to tell a good story, but one woven from numerous sources, interviews, and their contexts. Lindop indulges in a few places in dramatic reconstructions, though he clearly signals these. Depending upon one's taste, a reconstruction can either be imaginative and eye-opening or artificial and precious. Williams' initiation into the magical society, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, is the stronger of these—in part because there is no other way to help readers empathize with what made such rituals attractive. Lindop's opening reconstruction in the prologue of Williams's February 5, 1940 address on Milton's Comus is the more dramatically interesting, though undoubtedly some will judge it indulgent. Wisely, Lindop does not employ this method often. More often, he liberally quotes the correspondence, which is of supreme help to both readers and scholars, as well as interviews, and these move the narrative along effectively, finely setting out character and event. Lindop's detailed quotation from the Order of Co-inherence is particularly helpful. Likewise, Lindop knows how to wrap matters up. The last chapter and the epilogue are suitably elegiac, and he ends the biography with a note of hope, quoting Florence “Michal” Williams' dream of Charles clothed in eternity.

The prologue's subject has another purpose—we have a chance to see Williams in the world of Second World War Oxford. Titling the book The Third Inkling, after all, was a good marketing move. How many readers of Williams come to him by way of C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien? At the same time, Lindop's biography reminds us that much of Williams' career took place before he met the informal writers' circle, and Williams' long service at the Oxford University Press in London is the more natural setting for his life and corpus. (The matter of the Inklings is only taken up after page 306.) Lindop's descriptions of Amen House and the O.U.P. are particularly fascinating, and Lindop discusses them in such detail that one cannot help but see the staff at Amen House as Williams' true community rather than that of the more famous dons. Lindop also weaves in anecdotes of Williams' many other literary connections, which give further color to the account.

Any honest story of Williams' life must deal with the women he befriended, loved, and, in Svengali-like fashion, at times emotionally and sadomasochisti-
cally abused, some by mutual consent—if that is possible in affairs of the heart and body. For this reason if no other, The Third Inkling offers a more complete assessment than Alice Mary Hadfield’s Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work (OUP, 1983) or Philip and Carol Zaleski’s recent The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings (FSG, 2015). Like Hadfield and the Zaleskis, Lindop avoids flattening Williams into a caricature, yet his fuller biography most fully forces the issue. Williams’ doctrine of co-inherence, his romantic theology, and his close analogic ties between spiritual and erotic love are not easily separable from his effect on women. The list grows rather tedious: his wife Michal, his lover Phyllis Jones, Anne Bradby (Ridler), Thelma Mills (Shuttleworth), Alice Mary Miller (Hadfield), Lois Lang-Sims, Olive Speake, Mary Butts, Ruth Spalding, Joan Wallis, Anne Renwick. Lindop is careful to draw out the nuances of each, yet the overall affect is deadening, and the one who continues to admire Williams must ask why continue. Some of these, such as his friendships with Miller and Bardby were judicious, somewhat healthy, and hardly predatory. Others, such as those with Lang-Sims, Renwick, and Speake, were disturbing. (The pathological Butts, in turn, left Williams rather frightened.) Taken together, these relationships cannot help but dismantle the myth of Williams’ sanctity.

Perhaps all biographies have this corrupting quality. They leave us with, if not a more perverse picture of beloved authors, then at least a more mundane one. Many readers of Williams will, of course, already know something of these matters, both magical and sexual. Still, the overall impact of reading about them all, one after the other, is tragic, pathetic, and perplexing. Lindop faces head-on the dilemma of Williams’ sexual failures, especially in light of his powerful influence on others for the good. He is careful not to defend Williams, yet he is struck with the man’s ironic confluence of counsel and manipulation. Wallis, for example, could still speak of Williams as “the most remarkable and good man I’ve ever met,” even after the sadistic, magical games. Perhaps this ugly mixture asks of his life a hermeneutical question, and not just a psychological or a moral one. In what metaphysical framework can such success and failure make sense? For example, after years of neglect and betrayal by Charles, the restoration of Charles and Michal’s love in his last years is no excuse, but it does portend redemption, that is, if one is willing to grant him such.

The Third Inkling is primarily a biography rather than a work of critical assessment, but Lindop does permit himself passing judgments. These can raise expectations beyond what the narrative permits. Indeed, the biographical plot runs the risk of treating Williams’ work as only proof texts for his life. The theological writings are mentioned amidst the crush of his many other