

# Foreword

by Professor Eamon Duffy

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was a one-man publishing phenomenon. More than ninety of his books appeared in his own (relatively short) lifetime – novels and short stories, travel-books, light essays, comic and serious verse, plays, literary criticism, social and economic theory, popular philosophy and religious apologetic – all generated in the course of an exhausting career as a debater, lecturer, and political activist, and as a magazine-editor and weekly columnist for a dozen London papers. He was also a talented comic draughtsman, illustrating his own and other men's books, and, at the end of his life, an accomplished radio broadcaster.

The millions of words he poured out made him a celebrity, who commanded four-figure lecture fees in Depression America, while his spectacular bulk, boozy *bonhomie* and theatrical appearance (slouch hat, pince-nez, cloak and swordstick) made him a cartoonist's godsend. The crime-novelist John Dixon Carr modelled a best-selling fictional detective, Dr Gideon Fell, round Chesterton's public persona. He was a hard man to ignore or forget, though not everyone liked what they saw. The diarist A.C. Benson, author of *Land of Hope and Glory*, and precisely the sort of establishment figure Chesterton loved to loathe, recalled him making an after-dinner speech at the Pepysean Feast at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and noted with fastidious horror the sweat which streamed under Chesterton's dress-shirt cuff as he talked, to sizzle off the end of his cigar.

Chesterton was a product of the turbulent last phase of the Victorian age. He was a child of Imperial Britain who was to become one of the fiercest critics of imperialism, a vehement opponent of the Boer War and author of an essay on Indian nationalism which decisively influenced Gandhi's thought and action. Born in 1874, he studied art at the Slade School during the era of Wilde, Beardsley and the *Yellow Book*, and he formed his deepest convictions in reaction against the decadent nihilism which he believed was sapping the culture of his time. Educated in a politically liberal Unitarian household, he struggled his way to a robust Christian faith which saw in the dogmatic and moral affirmations of mainstream Christianity an anchor in the rudderless drift of contemporary

society. But he used his gift of aphorism and paradoxical inversion to present those traditional affirmations as the opposite of strait-jacketed convention. The 'Romance of Orthodoxy' was the distilled wisdom of the ages, as fresh and heady as champagne after the cloying absinthe of the Aesthetes or the joyless teetotalism of late-Victorian secular Puritanism.

He clothed these perceptions with the gift of memorable utterance. Every paragraph of Chesterton builds towards a ringing final sentence, every argument is clinched with an epigram. Reading him, one never forgets that, for all his rejection of Aestheticism, his literary taste was formed in the age of Stevenson and Wilde. This way of writing all too easily degenerates into laboured cleverness, and can be very tiresome. Reading Chesterton it is difficult at times not to sympathise with the early reviewer who declared that paradox and aphorism should flavour a salad like a sliver of onion; but 'Mr Chesterton's salad is all onion'. Nevertheless, in the midst of all this sometimes showy intellectual sharp-shooting, Chesterton scores an astonishing number of hits. When W.H. Auden edited an anthology of aphorisms for Faber and Faber, he included more extracts from Chesterton's work than from any other writer except Dr Johnson, Goethe and Nietzsche.

Chesterton's religious world-view was formulated very early in his career as a writer. It is implicit in his first sustained critique of the philosophical alternatives to Christianity on offer in Edwardian England, the rumbustious polemic *Heretics*, published in 1905. It was fully articulated three years later as a sparkling defence of historic Christianity, unquestionably his best and most constructive argumentative book, *Orthodoxy*. Thereafter, though he consolidated and revisited the themes set out in those two works, he added little that was entirely new. In 1925, however, he extended the scope of his critique of contemporary secularism in *The Everlasting Man*, a remarkable reply to H.G. Wells' *Outline of History*, characterized by a brilliantly iconoclastic scepticism about the assumptions underlying much early twentieth-century 'scientific' anthropology.

The consistency of Chesterton's religious and social convictions informs much of his best writing; but, combined with the relentless pressures on a jobbing journalist, it makes for an occasional sense of *déjà vu*. Anyone who reads him in bulk will recognise themes, tropes and even phrases reworked and reused from essay to essay, book to book. Most of his books were in fact compilations of recycled journalism, much of it in the form of whimsical excursions on apparently inconsequential topics – 'A piece of chalk', 'On lying in bed', 'On aids to golf', 'Cheese'. In fact, even his worst books are seldom without flashes of brilliance and unforgettable phrases; but the taste for essay-as-entertainment which shaped his staple production has passed, and only the rare enthusiast is likely to plough through these collections, whose very titles are a turn-off – *Tremendous*

*Trifles, Fancies versus Fads, Generally Speaking, All Things Considered.*

Chesterton was a prodigious worker, but a very lazy writer: a literary critic of genius, he habitually quoted from his prodigious memory, rarely entirely accurately, and he never checked a reference in his life. Even his best books are littered with contradictions and mistakes. In 1933 he was commissioned to write a short monograph on St Thomas Aquinas. He had perhaps read some Aquinas as a young man (his secretary Dorothy Collins claimed so, though there is little independent sign of it). Characteristically, he launched on the book and dictated more than half without notes or preparatory reading of any kind. He then told his secretary, 'I want you to go to London and get me some books.' When asked which books, he declared 'I don't know'. She duly took advice, and supplied a bundle of appropriate secondary reading. Chesterton flipped through them, making no notes, though he doodled a cartoon of St Thomas in the margin opposite an anecdote which he subsequently elaborated. He then dictated the rest of the book. As a reviewer of genius, Chesterton had prodigious and rapid powers of assimilation, and he had evidently absorbed an understanding of some of the key elements of Thomism from knowledgeable friends like the Dominican Fr Vincent McNabb. Etienne Gilson, the greatest contemporary authority on St Thomas, more than once declared the resulting book the best ever written on its subject; but the claim is manifestly informed by hero-worship. Chesterton's treatment of Aquinas is almost entirely based on a few well-known anecdotes about the saint's life, and two or three salient ideas identified from secondary works by inferior but better-informed writers like the Jesuit Martin D'Arcy (fulsomely and embarrassingly deferred to in Chesterton's text). What makes the book remarkable is not its penetration to the heart of St Thomas so much as Chesterton's journalistic ability to spin a plausible and lively monograph out of such exiguous materials.

The books of Chesterton which survive *as books*, therefore, are few enough, though still more than most writers can hope for. The first two volumes of the Father Brown stories, certainly; perhaps also his disturbingly surreal fantasy novel, *The Man who was Thursday* (still in print as a Penguin paperback), his wonderfully insightful writings on Dickens, his short study of *The Victorian Age in Literature*, the collected verse, and, among the religious writings, *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*. Though *Heretics* contains some of his wittiest and most telling polemic, many of the contemporaries he used as anvils on which to hammer out his thoughts – Joseph McCabe, G.W. Foote, Lowes Dickenson – have sunk into richly deserved obscurity, and in the process have blunted the sharpness and brilliance of his attack. Among the later works, *The Everlasting Man* stands out for its sustained intellectual power and focus.

Chesterton's reception into the Catholic Church in 1922 was a great personal happiness and the logical outcome of the convictions he had been defending all his adult life. One needs to be reminded that the author of *Heretics*, *Orthodoxy* and the best Father Brown stories was in fact an Anglican. But it cannot be said that this long-delayed conversion did very much for his writing. Chesterton the Catholic was too often prickly, waspish and excessively defensive. *The Thing*, a collection of essays on religious themes published in 1929, attempted to replicate for interwar England the moral and intellectual critique so sparkingly achieved for Edwardian England in *Heretics*. But *The Thing* is a self-consciously denominational and even sectarian book as *Heretics* was not, unattractively tribal, defending even the least lovely aspects of 1920s Catholicism against 'our enemies'. It was this sort of writing which stung George Orwell (never, it must be said, entirely free of old-fashioned anti-Catholic prejudice) to claim that, though Chesterton was a talented writer and 'according to his lights' a true friend to democracy, he had nevertheless chosen 'to suppress both his sensibilities and his intellectual honesty in the cause of Roman Catholic propaganda', so that 'during the last twenty years or so of his life, his entire output was in reality an endless repetition of the same thing. . . . Every book that he wrote, every paragraph, every sentence, every incident of every story, . . . had to demonstrate beyond possibility of mistake the superiority of the Catholic over the Protestant or the pagan.'

But if Chesterton is repetitive, and can be sectarian, Orwell was mistaken in dismissing the last twenty years of Chesterton's output. Even the worst of Chesterton's books show flashes of the old brilliance. He himself declared of the novels of Dickens that they 'are simply lengths cut from the flowing and mixed substance called Dickens – a substance of which any given length will be certain to contain a given portion of brilliant and of bad stuff. . . . The best of his work can be found in the worst of his works'. *Mutatis mutandis*, that applies as much to Chesterton himself as to Dickens: his verse apart, literary form was of less interest to Chesterton than the core ideas to which his writing so often returned. Kevin Morris's anthology does a great service in presenting the religious and philosophical thought of this prodigious but uneven genius in the aphoristic form in which in fact it was mostly conceived.

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