

Mini Biography of G.K. Chesterton

G.K. Chesterton plays a secondary and supporting role in my PhD thesis. Just as Chesterton's work is there of interest principally for its relation to the philosophical strands of C.S. Lewis' thought under investigation, this short biography of Chesterton is also of a secondary nature. This brief sketch of G.K. Chesterton's life and work begins by noting his influence on C.S. Lewis. It was in 1918, while recovering in hospital from a bout of trench fever, that Lewis first came across the writings of G.K. Chesterton.

I had never heard of him and had no idea of what he stood for; nor can I quite understand why he made such an immediate conquest of me. It might have been expected that my pessimism, my atheism, and my hatred of sentiment would have made him to me the least congenial of all authors. It would almost seem that Providence, or some 'second cause' of a very obscure kind, quite over-rules our previous tastes when It decides to bring two minds together. Liking an author may be as involuntary and improbable as falling in love. I was by now a sufficiently experienced reader to distinguish liking from agreement. I did not need to accept what Chesterton said in order to enjoy it. His humour was of the kind which I like best – not 'jokes' imbedded in the page like currents in a cake, still less (what I cannot endure), a general tone of flippancy and jocularity, but the humour which is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather (as Aristotle would say) the 'bloom' on dialectic itself. The sword glitters not because the swordsman set out to make it glitter but because he is fighting for his life and therefore moving it very quickly. For the critics who think Chesterton frivolous or 'paradoxical' I have to work hard to feel even pity; sympathy is out of the question. Moreover, strange as it may seem, I liked him for his goodness. I can attribute this taste for myself quite freely (even at that age) because it was a liking for goodness which had nothing to do with any attempt to be good myself ...

In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere – 'Bibles laid open, millions of surprises,' as Herbert says, 'fine nets and stratagems.' God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous.¹

Many of Chesterton's books could be found in C.S. Lewis's library. Lewis referred to Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* as "the best popular apologetic" he knew. In the year before he died Lewis listed it among the ten books that had had the greatest influence in shaping his "philosophy of life".²

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in Kensington, London on 29th May 1874. A younger brother, Cecil, arrived five years later. This evidently pleased young Gilbert who announced, "Now I shall always have an audience". But as the elder brother himself recorded, as soon as Cecil could speak he would not consent to merely listen to his brother, but insisted upon arguing with Gilbert. Indeed, as the boys were growing up they disagreed on almost every possible subject. But though the brothers were constantly locked in debate, each had a deep love for the other. Though they always argued, they never quarrelled. The statement could be made about very many of the other friendships Gilbert was to form. In his adult years he was very frequently to be found similarly locked in debate with either George Bernard Shaw or H.G.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* [1955](London: Fount, 1977), pp. 153-4.

² See the entry under "Chesterton" in Jeffrey D. Schultz and John G. West (eds.) *The C.S. Lewis Readers Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), p. 133 and Aidan Mackey's "The Christian Influence of G.K. Chesterton on C.S. Lewis" in Andrew Walker and James Patrick (eds.) *A Christian for all Christians* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), pp. 68-82.

Wells, but despite deep differences of opinion on matters of faith and politics (and much else besides) both would be counted among Chesterton's closest friends.

During his boyhood Chesterton was tall and clumsy. At school he was generally regarded as absent-minded, untidy, and 'slow'. He was frequently the object of class jokes. At the same time Chesterton was well thought of by his fellow students, perhaps principally because he took these jokes so well, always being willing to laugh at the jokes made at his expense. Probably the most important element of Chesterton's school days was the Junior Debating Club, of which he was one of the founding members. This group of boys were to be life long friends, and continued to meet throughout their lives. As its name suggests, the principle feature of the club was discussion and debate. These debates mostly focussed upon literary matters, important authors or texts therefore being the main topics.³

Despite the poor first impression made on his teachers, the illusion that Chesterton had little or no academic talent was thoroughly dispelled before his school days were over. In 1892 he entered a school poetry competition, and for his poem on St. Francis Xavier was awarded the Milton Prize.⁴ So much did this improve the staff's opinion of him that he was immediately moved up to the top class, and when Mrs. Chesterton came to visit Frederick Walker, the High Master, in 1894 she was told that her son was "six foot of genius. Cherish him, Mrs. Chesterton, cherish him."⁵

While his friends went off to various universities (with almost every member of the JDC taking brilliant scholarships at Oxford or Cambridge), Chesterton attended the Slade Art School. Little has been written on his attainments there, but that period of life was to shape his future immensely. It was then that he really began to struggle with the general pessimism of his peers. To them the universe was simply an inexplicable brute fact which formed the background of their lives, but was ultimately indifferent to any human ideals. Commitment to such a view went hand in hand with a commitment to determinism, moral nihilism and, on a more psychological level, a general apathy (or even antipathy) to life. Chesterton clearly found such a view unliveable, and after a period of struggling with such views – a period in which he later said he had been on the brink of madness – he began to rebel. He sought for a more liveable and life-affirming philosophy of his own.⁶

Chesterton's first job was as an office junior in a small publishing firm, Rodway. Within six months he had left to join the much larger Fisher Unwin, with whom he stayed until 1901. During the period he wrote occasional book reviews, mostly dealing with artistic or literary matters. Producing a substantial amount of writing along the way, Chesterton finally made the breakthrough he needed when various papers and publishers began to commission his work. In 1903 his first book *Browning* appeared, part of the Macmillan series on English men of letters. Despite containing quite a catalogue of factual errors and misquotes, the book was a huge success. By 1905 Chesterton had secured two weekly columns, one with the *London Illustrated News*, which lasted to his death in 1936. He also regularly wrote articles for *The Speaker*, the *Daily News*, *The Clarion* and other papers besides.

³ According to Masie Ward's *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944) in one "fairly typical month" topics papers were read on Shakespeare, Pope, and Heroditus, and in a week that a paper had not been prepared they discussed capital punishment (p. 32).

⁴ The school that Chesterton attended was St. Paul's, which Milton had attended as a boy.

⁵ Masie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, p. 42.

⁶ I should be careful to point out that though Chesterton was a vigorous opponent of pessimism, calling him an optimist is not necessarily the right way to express this. He spoke of himself in those terms for some time, but later came to think that neither 'optimism' nor 'pessimism' accurately described his position.

He produced a staggering amount of work. Part of the explanation for his phenomenal output was the financial rewards it brought. Not that Chesterton wished to be rich. He simply wished to be married, and Mrs. Blogg insisted that his income reach £500/year before Chesterton should wed her daughter, Frances. This had been achieved in 1901 and the two were married that year on 28th June. Despite his rising fame, and due perhaps mostly to the poor financial management Chesterton needed to continue his hard work to keep up even this level of income. However, by 1910 due to overwork and a diet containing far too much alcohol, he began to put on weight and his health was starting to suffer. The concurrent events in his brother's career, namely Cecil's trial for criminal libel, can only have served to increase Gilbert's burden by adding emotional strain.⁷

Had Gilbert and Frances not moved away from London to Beaconsfield by this time, it is likely that the complete collapse of his health would have come much earlier than it did. It was late in 1914 that Chesterton came to confirm George Bernard Shaw's hypothesis that "every man of genius has a critical illness at 40." Gilbert was incapacitated for several months, and at times Frances feared for his life.

In terms of Shaw's hypothesis we may say that nature achieved its object in making Chesterton "go to bed for several months," and Frances's fears were not realised. Still to come was the most significant event in Chesterton's life: his conversion to Catholicism. Though Chesterton had clearly been a Christian for quite some time, and had even been defending distinctively Catholic doctrines, it wasn't until 1922 that he was received into the Catholic Church. The delay was very largely due to concern for Francis. He did not want differences of religion to separate them in any way.⁸ But when Francis gave Gilbert her blessing he joined the Church amid much rejoicing. Francis herself converted to Catholicism four years later.

Chesterton's general untidiness and lack of organisation meant that he depended heavily upon Frances in all remotely practical matters. In a now famous telegram to his wife, Gilbert once wrote, "Am in Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?" Through sheer lack of organisation Chesterton was not infrequently late for, and sometimes completely missed, his speaking engagements. It wasn't until 1926, when they employed their first trained secretary, Dorothy Collins,⁹ that anything approaching order was brought out of the chaos of Gilbert's working life. Dorothy remained Gilbert's secretary throughout his life, and was also a great friend to Francis. Indeed, to Francis – who was unable to have children of her own – she was like a daughter.

⁷ It was Godfrey Isaacs, managing director of the Marconi Company, who took Cecil to court. Cecil, through the pages of the *New Witness*, of which he was the editor, had been engaged in exposing what later became known as the Marconi scandal, and Isaacs had evidently decided to take the offensive. After Cecil's death at the close of the First World War, Gilbert took charge of the *New Witness*, which (against Gilbert's wishes) soon became *G.K.'s Weekly*. This magazine was to become the mouthpiece of a political and economic movement known as Distributist League (of which Chesterton was elected the president). Distributism, which opposed both Capitalism and Socialism, was like Socialism in being an attempt to wrest property and power from the few and give it to the many ... but unlike Socialism, this was to be done giving small amounts of property to as many individuals as possible, and not giving to "the state". It was, in effect, a movement that supported small businesses (where "business" includes anything that one might do with one's own property) and opposed large ones.

⁸ Francis had always belonged to the anglo-catholic tradition, and had at one stage said that becoming a catholic was something she would never do.

⁹ As the presence of the word "trained" implies, Gilbert had other secretaries prior to employing Dorothy Collins, but (lovely as they were) none of these had such a revolutionary effect on the lives of Gilbert and Frances.

Chesterton was loved by nearly all who knew him, and loved nearly all those he knew. He had a special affinity with children, and youngsters were often entertained at their home in Beaconsfield. He happily allowed one little boy, Bernard Nicholl, who evidently found his Gilbert's name difficult, to refer to him as "Uncle Chestnut".¹⁰ Chesterton was a man who loved life, who had a fondness for puns, paradoxes, and jokes of all sorts. He especially enjoyed jokes made at his own expense, and particularly those about his size. He was the first to laugh when on returning from a lecturing trip, a friend of his commented that Gilbert had just been "looking round" in America. Indeed, he often made such jokes himself: when asked by an indignant elderly lady why he was not "at the front" during the First World War, he replied "My dear madam, if you'll step round this way a little, you will see that I *am*." This great wit shone through in his written work, and in his many public addresses and debates.

This written work included his theological and apologetic classics: *Heretics*, *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*, *St. Francis of Assisi*, and *St. Thomas Aquinas*. Besides these he also wrote poems, plays, biographies, and several novels including, perhaps most notably, *The Man Who Was Thursday*. He produced brilliant drawings, and provided the illustrations for several books by his close friend Hilaire Belloc.¹¹ In addition to this he wrote a great many newspaper articles, and despite his success in other fields, always wanted to be known as a journalist. However, Chesterton will doubtless remain best known as the creator of Father Brown, the hero of so many brilliant little detective stories. While Shaw hailed Gilbert as "a man of colossal genius," Kafka said, "Chesterton is so happy that one might almost believe that he has found God".

Having been ill for a number of months Chesterton died on the 14th June 1936. On the 27th June around two thousand people attended a memorial requiem mass at Westminster Cathedral. Bernard Nicholl, who was just ten when he was told of Chesterton's death and said: "I will always be lonely for him. Do you know, I think my Uncle Chestnut was not quite so fat as he pretended to be."¹² While this is among the most touching tributes to Chesterton, there was one far more impressive: a message from the Pope. But as is perhaps appropriate for a man whose life was spent embroiled in religious and political controversy, the Pope's message of sympathy extended those controversies beyond his death. For the Pope had bestowed upon him a title which was, or was thought to be, reserved for the king ... he had referred to Chesterton as a "gifted Defender of the Catholic Faith."

¹⁰ The Chesterton's were close friends with whole Nicholl family, who they had met on holiday and later came to live near them in Beaconsfield.

¹¹ Following an article on the pair by Shaw the two together became known as the Chesterbelloc. Both men were Catholic (though Belloc long before Chesterton) and held similar views on political and other matters.

¹² Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A life of G K Chesterton* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), p. 125.