



## - BOOK REVIEW -

Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943) xv—685 pp. (\$4.50 in U. S. A.; \$5.00 in Canada).

Like its subject, Maisie Ward's *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* is too big—in every way—to be adequately compassed by a review. It is the result of six years of research and thought, and will justify its author's efforts by remaining the biography of Chesterton, as her father's even more exhaustive work has remained the biography of Newman. Mrs. Sheed has earned the gratitude of innumerable Chesterton lovers the world over. What is more important, she is probably introducing many more readers to the attractions of that great mind and thereby helping to rescue some of its products from the publishers' limbo called "out of print."

The biography opens traditionally, and logically, with a description of family background and boyhood. There follows a picture of Chesterton, already looked up to by his contemporaries, as chairman of the Junior Debating Club at St. Paul's School, and as already so absorbed in fundamental problems that the details of his school work often suffered. After a sojourn at art school, chiefly important for its introducing him to some of the more diabolic aspects of reality, Chesterton entered the field of journalism in 1895, at the age of twenty one years. Six years later, after a long courtship, there occurred the tremendous event of marriage to his beloved Frances.

It was during the Boer War that Chesterton first attracted public attention by brilliant articles condemning England's action on the grounds of true patriotism as opposed to the jingoism of most of his countrymen. With his name made among the journalists of Fleet Street, he proceeded to establish it in the more literary publishing world and to give indications of the main trends his later work was to take. *Robert Browning*, written in 1903 as one of the English Men of Letters series, was the first of a large group of critical works in the field of literature; generally weak in factual detail, these studies invariably



throw new and valuable light on their subject through their author's grasp of universal ideas and their implications and through his ability to express abstractions vividly by a picturesque and revealing turn of phrase. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* inaugurated the fantasies, a group of imaginative novels each of which expresses allegorically one side of Chesterton's social or political thought. *Heretics*, published in 1905, was his first full-length attack on the aberrations of modern thought, the positive counterpart of which was the great *Orthodoxy*, and, later, *The Everlasting Man*. The message of *Heretics* was that only in a true philosophy of life could there be found the basis of fruitful action, and that most of modern life was based on a false philosophy when it was based on any at all. The deep thought of these, as of his later books, was pointed and made arresting by what Belloc called "his unique, his capital, genius for illustration by parallel, by example," and provided grounds for the superficial association of Chesterton's name with paradox, an association made by those who were so dazzled by the illustration that they missed what was illustrated. As Gilson expressed it, in the tribute of genius to genius, "Chesterton was one of the deepest thinkers who ever existed; he was deep because he was right; and he could not help being right; but he could not help either being modest and charitable, so he left it to those who could understand him to know that he was right, and deep; to the others, he apologized for being right, and he made up for being deep by being witty. That is all they can see of him."

After describing his journalistic and literary debut, the biography follows the crowded years of Chesterton's young manhood, his further publishing, his lectures and debates, and his host of friends, men like Hilaire Belloc, Maurice Baring, Eric Gill, Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Max Beerbohm, Monsignor Ronald Knox, and Father Vincent McNabb. His biting attack on corrupt public life began in these years in collaboration with his brother Cecil, reached its climax in the Marconi libel case, and was continued until his death in the columns of such periodicals as the *New Witness* and its successor, *G. K.'s Weekly*. His devotion to what he regarded as his patriotic duty took a constant toll of time and strength that less unselfish men would have spent to their personal ad-



vantage. The chapters devoted to the war show the historical vision of Chesterton in recognizing the Prussian menace when most of his countrymen were busy imitating Prussians, in condemning the vacillating weakness of what passed for British foreign policy after Versailles, and of warning an unheeding world of what Hitler really meant.

In 1922, after years of hard thought on the subject, occurred the greatest single event in Chesterton's life, his conversion to the Catholic Church. His conversion did not effect any radical change in his outlook, for he had always been on the side of the angels, but it completed and deepened his thought on fundamental issues and was reflected unmistakably in such varied works as *St. Francis of Assisi*, *The Everlasting Man*, *The Outline of Sanity*, and *St. Thomas Aquinas*. In 1924 came the launching of *G. K.'s Weekly*, undertaken to continue the work of Gilbert's brother, Cecil, who had lost his life as a result of the Great War. In this paper the combination that Shaw had christened the Chesterbelloc propounded Christian and hence unpopular views on economics and sociology and preached distributism in season and out of season. Their basic principles, as Mrs. Sheed points out, are the same as those underlying our own cooperative movement. After a description of the lecture tours of America and of his use of radio as a new medium, the biography concludes with a tribute to Chesterton's most outstanding Christian virtues, charity and humility.

In *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, Maisie Ward has written what is today an unusual because an objective biography. She has kept out of it any special pleading or personal theory, and has given us Gilbert Keith Chesterton through his own actions and words and those of his friends. And she has done it at the proper time, when records are accessible and memories fresh. The book is crammed with carefully chosen quotations, and not its least valuable feature is a list of Chesterton's works and a good index. This book is recommended as an introduction for those who may not know Chesterton. And for those who do know him, whether in the sudden surprises of the Father Brown stories or in the forceful apologetics of *Orthodoxy* or *The Everlasting Man* or in the trenchant criticisms of social injustice in *What's Wrong With the World* or the *Outline of Sanity* or in the winging, ringing lines of *The*



*Ballad of the White Horse*, this biography will furnish further light on and deeper appreciation of one of the truly great figures of the twentieth century—Gilbert Keith Chesterton.

—H. L. Johnston.

---

C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1943). 160 pp.

Written, I believe, some time ago by C. S. Lewis, a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, *The Screwtape Letters* has been rescued from an underserved oblivion by the success of one of its author's later books—another example of the vagaries of the publishing world. For once, the jacket advertisement (or "blurb" if you prefer technical language) does give an accurate description of the volume, and so will be quoted in full.

"This extraordinary little book is a startling, unique and powerful presentation of the old, old problem of the continuous battle for the soul of man between the insidious forces of evil and the triumphant forces of good.

"It consists of a series of letters written by Screwtape (an important official in his Satanic Majesty's 'Lower-archy') to Wormwood, his nephew, who is a junior devil on earth. The letters are instruction in temptation as to how to corrupt the faith of Wormwood's 'patient,' who is in danger of becoming a Christian.

"The book sparkles with wit and reveals on every page a penetrating understanding of man's spiritual struggle upward toward the City of God. Its incisive truth, its scintillating style cry out for quotation. The reader will irresistibly find himself carrying it about, reading it to anyone who will listen. It is a perfect joy and should become a classic.

Thus the advertiser, and thus the facts. Mr. Lewis has done a grand job. He has chosen to remain strictly non-sectarian, and, as a result, is a trifle vague on some fundamental points. But whether considered as theology as spiritual reading, or as subtle satire, the book is a huge

success. On the theological side, Mr. Lewis, by way of Screwtape, provides brief but not inadequate explanations of such problems as the freedom of the human will in the face of God's foreknowledge of particular human actions (what philosophers and theologians call future contingent events). And his picture of the hatred of the devils even among themselves and their utter inability to grasp the meaning of love, or charity, reveals one of the horrors of hell—the complete absence of friendship. Further, Mr. Lewis's probing of the soul, his laying bare the motives behind human actions and the dangers of diabolic influence makes this book genuinely valuable as spiritual reading. But it is spiritual reading of a refreshingly unusual kind. The keen satire directed against human foibles and such current intellectual fads as "The Historical Point of View," otherwise known as relativism, keeps the reader in a continual state of chuckling appreciation. The danger is that, as so often happened with Chesterton, the reader may laugh at the satire and forget the truth behind it. For this book is not a fantasy; it is not an allegory; it is truth, stark, literal—and entertaining.

—H. L. Johnston.

