



The DEFENDANT

Newsletter of the Australian Chesterton Society

Vol. 25 No. 3

Winter 2018

Issue No. 98

'I have found that humanity is not incidentally engaged, but eternally and systematically engaged, in throwing gold into the gutter and diamonds into the sea. . . . ; therefore I have imagined that the main business of man, however humble, is defence. I have conceived that a defendant is chiefly required when worldlings despise the world – that a counsel for the defence would not have been out of place in the terrible day when the sun was darkened over Calvary and Man was rejected of men.'

G.K. Chesterton, 'Introduction', *The Defendant* (1901)

Chesterton's Close Shavian (Karl Schmude)

Pages 1-2

An Interview with Nancy Brown

Pages 3-4

Chesterton's Presence of Mind (John Young)

Page 5

St Francis of Assisi and the High Road of Reason and Nature (James V. Schall)

Pages 6-7

A Child Remembers 'Big Uncle' Chesterton (Sheila Cook)

Page 8

Chesterton's Close Shavian

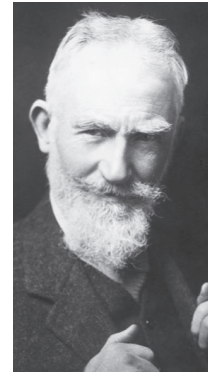
by Karl Schmude

At a lecture in Toronto in the 1930s, Chesterton spoke on 'Culture and the Coming Peril'. He pointed to the bombardment of external pressures – intellectual, educational, psychological, emotional and artistic – that were robbing people of any serious access to leisure and creative pursuits.

At question time he was asked: 'Is George Bernard Shaw a coming peril?'

'Heavens, no,' replied Chesterton. 'He is a disappearing pleasure.'

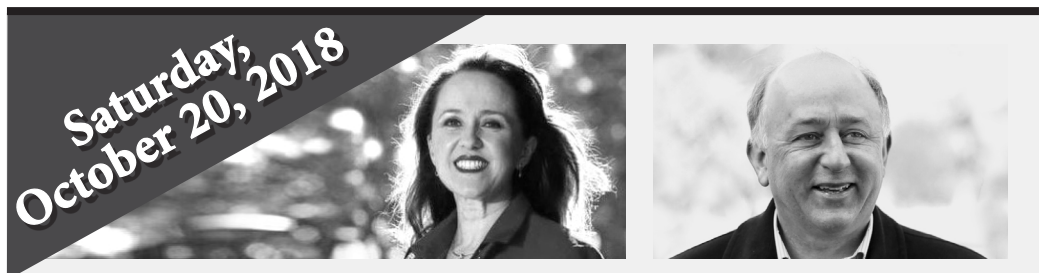
The witty remark at once hinted at and concealed the deep respect which Chesterton had for Shaw. While they differed on almost every subject, they remained the firmest of friends. Shaw admired Chesterton's talents hugely, once describing him as 'a man of colossal genius'.



George Bernard Shaw

Chesterton, for his part, wrote often on Shaw, including a chapter on him in his 1905 study, *Heretics*. Here he described Shaw as 'a man whose philosophy is quite solid, quite coherent, and quite wrong.'

Continued on page 2



Come to Campion for the Chesterton Conference

The theme of this year's conference – to be held on **Saturday, October 20, 2018** at Campion College in Sydney – will be 'Chesterton and the Child'.

The focus will be on children and the family in the light of Chesterton's wisdom.

Among the key speakers will be **Sophie York** and **David van Gend** (pictured), who will deliver papers on 'Children and the Family in Australia Today'.

Sophie is an author, lawyer, university lecturer and naval officer. David is a family doctor and author. Both were prominent and articulate supporters of traditional marriage in the recent plebiscite.

A special guest at the conference will be the American author, Nancy Brown, who will speak at two sessions – one on G.K. Chesterton's wife, Frances, the other on children's literature, notably the Father Brown stories, which she has adapted for younger readers.

The cost will be \$65 (including lunch), with a \$25 student concession rate.

RSVP – by September 30:

Karl Schmude – at kgschmude@gmail.com or by phone at: 0407 721 458

They engaged in public debates, most famously one called 'Do We Agree?', which attracted an overflow audience. It was later published – and is available online (<http://lingualeo.com/pt/jungle/do-we-agree-a-debate-between-gk-chesterton-and-bernard-shaw-1928-143239#/page/14>).



Shaw, Belloc and Chesterton at one of the 'great debates'

Chaired by Hilaire Belloc, the debate focused on the different social philosophies of Chesterton and Shaw. It confirmed Maisie Ward's observation that Chesterton excelled in such public contests. Compared with his lectures, which were often less impressive, debates gave Chesterton a special opportunity to display his wit and mental sharpness – as when he compared Shaw's support of state ownership and control (socialism) with his own espousal of widely owned property and freedom (distributism):

'Mr Bernard Shaw proposes to distribute wealth. We propose to distribute power.'

At times these debates took place within the same issue of a journal – for example, in 1933 in the pages of *Nash's Pall Mall Magazine*. Publicised as 'Shaw versus Chesterton: A Duel of Wits,' Chesterton posed the question, 'Should we be governed by Intellectuals?', while Shaw responded, 'Why not give the Intellectuals a chance?'

In 1909, Chesterton devoted an entire book to Shaw (*George Bernard Shaw*) who, in reviewing it, declared with

characteristic panache that it was 'what everybody expected it to be, the best work of literary art I have yet provoked.' Chesterton penetrated the veneer of Shaw's professed atheism and detected his profound religious sensibility.

Among the weaknesses which, in Chesterton's view, distorted Shaw's whole philosophy of life was his puritanism – a trait which would have been assumed to be forbidden by his 'liberated' views on sex, and yet one of which Shaw himself was apparently unaware.

Chesterton recognised that Shaw's puritanism lay in his undue concentration on the mind in contemplating God or goodness to the exclusion of other modes of appreciation such as beauty.

'A Puritan,' wrote Chesterton, 'meant originally a man whose mind had no holidays. . . This is the essential Puritan idea, that God can only be praised by direct contemplation of Him. You must praise God only with your brain; it is wicked to praise Him with your passions or your physical habits or your gesture or instinct of beauty.'

'Therefore it is wicked to worship by singing or dancing or drinking sacramental wines or building beautiful churches or saying prayers when you are half-asleep.' ('The Puritan,' *George Bernard Shaw*, 1909)

Shaking the bars of freedom

One aspect of Shaw that may be a surprise to many was his hidden religious understanding. For 26 years, he exchanged letters with a Benedictine nun, Dame Laurentia McLachlan, of the Stanbrook Abbey in England, whom he described as 'an enclosed nun with an unenclosed mind'.

The correspondence, published in a book of tribute to Dame Laurentia called *In A Great Tradition* (1956), revealed an unknown side of Shaw, who was famously sceptical about religion in public. It shed light on his belief in prayer, his devotion to Our Lady, and his appreciation of the freedom paradoxically enjoyed by his cloistered friend.

'When we are next touring in your neighbourhood,' he once wrote to Dame Laurentia, 'I shall again shake your bars and look longingly at the freedom on the other side of them.' ■

'Mr Shaw cannot understand that the thing which is valuable and lovable in our eyes is man – the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable man. And the things that have been founded on this creature immortally remain; the things that have been founded on the fancy of the Superman have died with the dying civilizations which alone have given them birth.'

'When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing His great society, He chose for its corner-stone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob, a coward – in a word, a man. And upon this

rock He has built His Church, and the gates of Hell have not prevailed against it.

'All the empires and the kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness, that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible. For no chain is stronger than its weakest link.'

– G.K. Chesterton, 'Mr Bernard Shaw,' *Heretics* (London: Bodley Head, 1905)



Nancy Brown - An Interview

by Sean P. Dailey

The American author Nancy Brown (pictured) will be a star speaker at this year's Australian Chesterton conference being held on Saturday, October 20, at Campion College.

Nancy is the biographer of Gilbert Chesterton's wife, Frances (The Woman Who Was Chesterton) and has also written on Harry Potter and St Francis as well as adapting Father Brown stories for younger readers. She is a regular contributor to the American Chesterton Society magazine, Gilbert, and this interview with her, which appeared in the November-December 2015 issue, is reprinted with the kind permission of the Society.

Gilbert First, some background. When did you first encounter G.K. Chesterton, and what did you like about him?

NB I first heard of Chesterton as a freshman in college, where we read *Orthodoxy* in freshman English class. I hated the book and burned it when class was done. It was an inauspicious beginning. Twenty years later I re-read *Orthodoxy* and thought it was the best book I'd ever read. Joseph Pearce's biography, *Wisdom and Innocence*, was just newly published, so I got that and read it. After that I didn't just love his writing, I loved the man himself. When I read him, I felt he understood me, and we would get along fine as neighbours. I wished he was my neighbour, in fact.

Gilbert What got you interested in Frances Chesterton, his wife?

NB As I was reading Pearce's book, I read a little bit about Chesterton's wife, and was immediately interested in her as a person. What was she like? How did she have the patience to deal with Chesterton's personality? His eccentricities? His absentmindedness? His genius?

Gilbert Not much is known about her. Did this pique your interest? Make you want to learn more?

NB Yes, I began searching for information on her. I figured with so public a figure as her husband was, there was probably a lot of information on her as well. I was wrong about that!

Gilbert What was the first step in your research? Were you able to find out anything here in the U.S.?

NB First, I took clues out of the biographies I read. Footnotes helped. Then I started following those clues. Luckily, I live somewhat near the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, and I began taking regular trips there, looking for information. Once the librarians and staff knew what I was doing, they helped me find everything they had on Frances, most of which were copied letters, from the attic at Top Meadow Cottage. But they had some of Frances's actual letters (which I touched!). I also read over all the poetry Chesterton wrote, a lot of which is addressed to Frances. I got a feel for their relationship doing that.

There is more archival information in the U.S. and in Canada than just at Wade, but because of my work schedule, I was unable to get to more than just a few places. So I hired graduate students at the colleges I was interested in, and had them go through the manuscripts and archives to find things for me.

Gilbert After you got going, how were you able to learn more? Did you get grant money?

NB Every piece of information I got led me to another clue. Beside the U.S., I wrote to the British Library and was able to obtain scans of letters that I wanted. I keep following every clue I could. I also decided to research Frances Chesterton's genealogy, and with the help of a genealogist, got great information. A university in Canada has microfiche of almost everything in the British Library, and I was able to see all of that.



The reading room at Wheaton College's Wade Center near Chicago. The Center has superb collections of various Christian authors, including Chesterton, Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis.

Gilbert So what was researching in England like? Did you find primary sources? Any writings?

NB Researching in England was both joyful and frustrating. I knew if I went to London I would honestly need about three months to look at everything I wanted to see. This is because, in the manuscript rooms in the British Library, the researcher is limited as to how many items one can request per day. However, besides that, it takes a lot of time to go through the files, because often one is not allowed to take photographs, but must take notes with pencil and paper. My week there went all too quickly. I loved it, but want to go back soon.

Aidan Mackey, another great Chestertonian known to *Gilbert* subscribers, whom I met up with in Oxford when I was there,

gave me a stack of things that were Frances's. These were copies of her plays, her poems, some with her own handwriting on them where she corrected or changed words, etc. These I treasure, but will turn over to the Chesterton Study Centre in Oxford.

Gilbert Were you able to interview people who may have known her? Or known people who knew her?

NB The closest I came to interviewing people who might have known her was to talk to her great-nephews. These are the grandchildren of Ethel and Lucian Oldershaw. For them, Gilbert and Frances were their great uncle and aunt, and they still had boxes of family papers, memories of family stories, and photographs, all of which they scanned and shared with me over time. I am so grateful to them for sharing that with me. And I think they were happy someone finally connected them to their famous relatives!

Gilbert What did you learn about Frances that you wouldn't learn from reading only Chesterton?

NB Her whole secret life. We know very little of her from Chesterton, other than he loved her madly and deeply and depended on her for everything. She was her own person, had deep faith, she lived the Christian life, taking care of the sick, visiting in hospitals, teaching and tutoring young children. And she was a writer: she wrote plays and poems. She loved domestic life, gardening, making butter, darning socks by the fire; she loved having company over and celebrating birthdays.

Gilbert What was their courtship like? Their domestic life?

NB Their courtship was romantic. Gilbert fell deeply in love with Frances, and over the course of eighteen months, they became very close. They dated in the sense that they saw each other nearly every week, took walks in the parks, wrote each other poems. Frances pressed flowers for him and sang songs to him. They were like two lovebirds. Neither of their parents thought the spouse was suitable, but really, they were ideally compatible. Later on, Gilbert's mother—Marie Louise—would concede that at least Frances kept Gilbert out of the poor house. Marie Louise Chesterton always gave money to the sidewalk chalk artists she saw in

London, because she believed that Gilbert would have ended up there had it not been for Frances.

Gilbert How do you, as a woman, a wife, and a mother, personally identify with Frances?

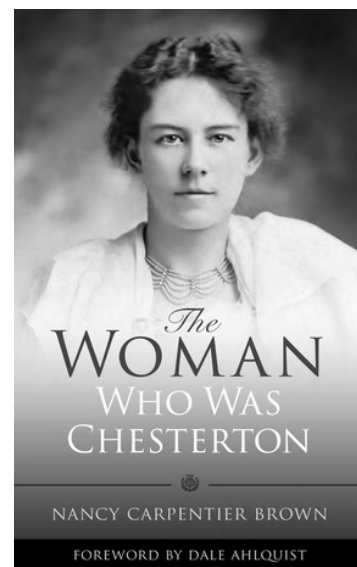
NB When I first read about Gilbert Chesterton in Pearce's biography, I realized that my husband is that same sort of artistic genius as Gilbert was. I saw a lot of similarities in the two men. My husband wakes up every day glorying in another day of being alive. He's a photographer, so he notices every little thing, like Gilbert, and is always in wonder about the smallest blade of grass, the beautiful sunset. This is a great thing, but it has its practical challenges, too. So, I wondered how Frances was able to cope with Gilbert, and how she did it. I thought if she lived next door, we'd share anecdotes about our husbands, and she might give me advice on how to cope with things like him not worrying about money, or him forgetting that the house needs a new roof, for example. When I read that Frances cried over doing the taxes, I could completely understand.

Gilbert Your book is the product of five? six? years of work. Are you glad to finally see it in print?

NB I've been working on it for eight years. Yes, it's great to see it in print.

Gilbert Why should people buy it?

NB If you'd like to know more about Gilbert and Frances, this book gives you more insight than any previous book. Gilbert could not have been the star journalist he was without Frances, and to see how they worked together and find out how she supported him in being able to do what he did, you have to read *The Woman Who Was Chesterton*. ■



Executive of the Australian Chesterton Society

PRESIDENT and EDITOR of 'The Defendant'

Mr Karl Schmude, 177 Erskine Street, Armidale NSW 2350
Phone: 0407 721 458 Email: kgschmude@gmail.com

SECRETARY / TREASURER: Mr Ray Finnegan,
2/15 Rapanea Street, RIVETT ACT 2611

Phone: (02) 6174 1510 Email: range2@grapevine.net.au

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Mr Symeon Thompson
c/- Editor of 'The Defendant'

Society Membership

The annual membership fee of the Australian
Chesterton Society is **\$30.00**.

Subscriptions may be sent to the Secretary/Treasurer,
Mr Ray Finnegan, at the address opposite, or by
electronic transfer –

BSB: 062-908 (CBA Woden ACT)

Account No.: 10417201

Account Name: Australian Chesterton Society

Please include your name as depositor in the details box.

Chesterton's Presence of Mind

by John Young

John Young is an Australian philosopher who has contributed frequently to *The Defendant* as well as to journals and newspapers in Australia and overseas. He is the author of various books, including *Reasoning Things Out* (1982) and *The Natural Economy* (1997).

Maisie Ward's book *Return to Chesterton* contains many fascinating insights into the life of Gilbert Chesterton as remembered by people who knew him. In this article I will glance at some recollections, particularly those relating to his philosophical insight, his spiritual awareness, and his love of people.

Chesterton distinguished various kinds of absent-mindedness, including that which is really a presence of mind. And that is the kind of absentmindedness for which he was notorious. *Return to Chesterton* gives many examples.

There was the occasion, recorded by Mildred Wain, when she saw him go into a restaurant while having a great argument with a friend. Gilbert ordered two poached eggs on toast and some coffee. He didn't seem to notice their arrival but continued to talk and argue. To emphasise some point he put his hand down so forcefully on the edge of his plate that he tipped the eggs right into his lap, and just continued talking. When the waitress came over he said: 'Will you please bring me two more poached eggs – I seem to have lost the others.'

Of course there are numerous other examples of his absentmindedness, all due to his intense concentration on the subject in which he was engrossed. From boyhood on he had an insight into the *being* of things which most professors of philosophy never attain. This explains his close affinity with St Thomas Aquinas.

Tertullian, in the second century, said: 'The soul is of its very nature Christian.' Chesterton is a good example. He had an instinctive feeling for the deepest truths, those truths which Christianity elucidates. This appears strikingly in his book *Orthodoxy*, published when he was thirty-four, and when he still had a long way to travel on his spiritual journey.

Father Ignatius Rice said of Chesterton: 'He hid the fact that his whole being was concentrated on spiritual and supernatural things.' (p. 232).

After he became a Catholic he was so intensely aware of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and of his

own unworthiness, that he found it hard to go to Holy Communion. Maisie Ward writes: 'He had all the longing and the wonder, but only humility could give him the courage. If people would only remember that courage can only come through humility, never from pride! ... After Communion he said he was

overwhelmingly happy – "and yet the next time it's just the same again: the same dread, the same difficulty and reluctance"' (p. 245).

He had confided to Father Walker: 'I am frightened of that tremendous Reality.' Maisie Ward comments: 'Surely the very greatness of his faith brought to him at every Communion a richness of grace and of realisation that everyone of us might envy.' (p. 245).

From boyhood on he had an intense appreciation for the wonder of the created world: a metaphysical insight, I think, rather than a mystical insight.

While still at school he wrote a story called *A Crazy Tale*, in which a boy is called mad by his neighbours because he is so fully aware of the mysteries of life which his neighbours take as commonplace. As he stands in a field, 'every inch of the green place was a living thing, a spire or a tongue, rooted in the ground but alive...'

The memories recorded in Maisie Ward's book show Chesterton's love of people, and particularly of children. It was a great sorrow for Francis and Gilbert that they were unable to have children, and they both delighted in the children of their friends. One man said: 'When you talked with Chesterton you didn't feel how brilliant he was but how brilliant you were.' Maisie Ward comments that even children shared this impression (p. 102).

He did an astounding amount of work for publication, yet he still had time to write to his friends or to compose verses for them or illustrations. Had he not been a writer, he could have been a successful artist.

The greatest of his friends, of course, was Frances, and it was providential that he married her, for he needed her constant care in matters of everyday life: he was too absent-minded to look after such things himself.

A few days after his death Frances wrote to Father O'Connor, the priest on whom Father Brown was based. 'I find it increasingly difficult to keep going. The feeling that he needs me no longer is almost unbearable. How do lovers love without each other? We were always lovers. I have Mass said here for him every Tuesday – but I feel it is more for the repose of my soul than for his.' (p. 270). ■





St Francis of Assisi and the High Road of Reason and Nature

by James V. Schall S.J.

Fr James V. Schall SJ (pictured) has been a prolific writer of books and articles since the 1960s. He formerly taught at various universities, including the Gregorian in Rome and Georgetown in Washington DC. He has a deep knowledge of Chesterton's writings, as shown in such books as *Schall on Chesterton: Timely Essays on Timeless Paradoxes* (2000) and the *Introductions* he has written for a number of volumes of Chesterton's *Collected Works* (published by Ignatius Press).

Fr Schall contributes a regular column to Gilbert, the magazine of the American Chesterton Society. The following reflections on St Francis of Assisi appeared in the November-December 2015 issue of Gilbert, and is republished with the kind permission of the Society's President and the journal's editor, Dale Ahlquist.

The second chapter of Chesterton's *St Francis of Assisi* is titled 'The World St Francis Found'. Here Chesterton explained what went wrong with the ancient world. This world, led by the Greeks, set out to become 'natural'. In fact, it became startlingly 'unnatural'.

The period from the end of the Roman Empire to the twelfth century was a world in which this culturally embedded 'unnaturalness' was purged from most innocent and normal of things, like fire and water. These common things had been overshadowed by symbols and myths that prevented men from seeing them for themselves and their own goodness. They could not see a thing for *what it was* because they saw it as representing something else, usually something disordered.

If we begin the study of history with, say, Columbus, or the French Revolution, or World War I, or the landing on the Moon, we will not understand any of these events because we have no idea of what went before or how they came about.

Chesterton put it this way: 'Men for whom reason begins with the Revival of Learning, men for whom religion begins with the Reformation can never give a complete account of anything, for they have to begin with institutions whose origins they cannot explain, or generally even imagine.'

Francis of Assisi did not appear out of nowhere. He cannot be explained solely in terms of his poverty or supposed love of birds.

Since the present Pope has taken the name 'Francis', no doubt with the intention of calling to mind what St. Francis stood for, we do well to take a second look at this beloved saint.

This second look is particularly relevant, since, in our times, the things Francis of Assisi would have called 'unnatural' are now called 'natural'. Likewise, the beauty and care of the earth must be distinguished from a new form of 'nature-

worship' that sees the ecological 'care' of the earth down the ages as the substitute for man's transcendent eternal life.

Francis of Assisi was an Italian, in a land marked at every step with recollections of the two Romes now blended into one. 'To write history and to hate Rome, both pagan and papal, is practically to hate nearly everything that has happened. It comes very near to hating humanity on humanitarian grounds.'

The history of classical, imperial, and papal Rome is replete with messiness and signs of human sin and weakness. The humanitarian wants to think that we can have human beings without any taint of disorder of soul, with no need of redemption. To reject what men do, however unfortunate their acts, in the name of some abstract perfection, is to turn away the real human drama of actual human beings with their perennial marks of freedom badly used.

But St. Francis did see things anew, both in nature and in the life of the poor.

'Men will not believe because they will not broaden their minds.' It was St. Francis who opened eyes and, in many ways, still does. Chesterton thought that St. Francis could see things afresh because the dubious pagan images that had engulfed them were gone. He broadened minds that refused to see that something new was in the world. 'It [Francis's arrival] marked the moment when a certain spiritual expiation had been finally worked out and certain spiritual diseases had finally been expelled from the system.'

How do we understand such things? The Greeks held that 'if you start out with the idea of something splendidly obvious and direct; the idea that if a man walked straight ahead *on the high road of reason and nature*, he could come to no harm; especially if he was, as the Greek was, eminently enlightened and intelligent.'

The Greeks thought that being 'rational' was enough to be also good. They had not yet penetrated to Augustine's

experience of the ease in which 'all those beautiful things' of nature could provide an excuse for a man to miss the purpose of his being.

'The wisest men in the world set out to be natural; and the most unnatural thing in the world was the very first thing that they did.'

Nature, even though created by Him, is not God. We can fail to see that our own souls need to be self-ordered. The scientists and the professors, the judges and the politicians, suddenly in our time, explain, promote, and enforce on us what has always been seen to be 'unnatural'. They use their 'reason' to establish what they want to take place, not to attest to *what is*. They do not find a standard in things that indicates to them what they are.

What our time has in common with that late Roman world from whose vices the world needed purging was the elevation of sex to the central moral issue of human living. Chesterton's observations here are most instructive.

We not only live in a time of dogmatic 'unnaturalness' but a time when the forces behind this unnaturalness insist with the power of the modern state that what they do be called 'natural' and 'good'. In one sense, the vehemence with which what is sane is opposed is a testimony to the reasonableness of nature itself.

Chesterton put it this way:

'The effect of treating sex as only one innocent natural thing was that every other innocent natural thing became soaked and sodden with sex. For sex cannot be admitted to a mere equality among elementary emotions or experiences like eating and sleeping. The moment sex ceases to be a servant it becomes a tyrant.'

Probably no observation better explains the controversies we see over divorce, contraception, abortion, active homosexual life, use of fetal parts, experimentation on human lives, and euthanasia. They all arise out of a logic that devolves when we forget or refuse to accept what sex is about, its fundamental relation to children.

'Nothing distinguishes paganism from Christianity so clearly as the fact that the individual thing called philosophy had little or nothing to do with the social thing called religion.'

Philosophy is a lonely enterprise. It is the search for truth, for the explanation of why things are. It cannot be 'shared' except in the sense that we see the truth and the argument on which it is based. Philosophy seeks to know everything but knows that it reaches limits. It wonders why.

Religion is a natural virtue, a species of justice. It is our imperfect efforts to return to the gods what is due to them. And since, strictly speaking, we can give those who already have everything precisely nothing, religion searches for the

proper way to praise the source of this 'debt' that it knows it owes to someone.

Christian revelation is nothing less than God's instruction to us of the proper way to worship Him, something we really could not figure out by ourselves. This is why there are many 'religions' but only one true 'revelation'. Philosophy by being itself can see that revelation cannot be wholly ignored.

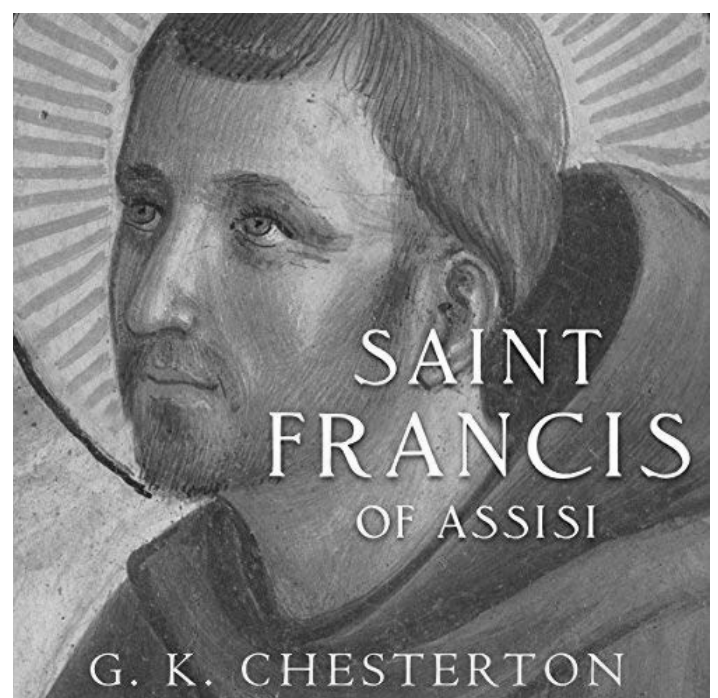
The last words that I will comment on are these: 'Neither the universe nor the earth now has any longer the old sinister significance of the world. They await a new reconciliation with man, but they are already capable of being reconciled. Man has stripped from his soul the last rag of nature-worship, and can return to nature.' We no longer 'worship' nature. We deny its very existence.

Our age needs a cleansing every bit as thorough as that which took place in the centuries before Francis of Assisi. What we 'worship' now is ourselves. But not unexpectedly, what we worship is that very 'unnaturalness' that Chesterton rightly saw occurring when we set out to be 'natural'.

Our world is not only 'unnatural', but it is a world that reaches into our very souls with all the power of the state to force us to say that what is 'unnatural' is 'natural'.

It would be difficult to imagine anything more aberrant, more contrary to what we are. Finally, we take pains to preserve and keep this earth as the only place where these aberrations can continue.

'The whole secret of [St. Francis] was that the secret of recovering the natural pleasures lay in regarding them in the light of a supernatural pleasure.' Such are Chesterton's final words on the recovery of nature. We will not see them if we only look for them. ■



A Child Remembers 'Big Uncle' Chesterton

by Sheila Cook

If a giant is to remain in loving memory, then he must be a 'gentle giant.'

My great uncle Gilbert was just that; but, of course, he was not only that. My own pet name for him was 'Big Uncle.' As my mother and her four brothers and sisters grew up, I filled the childhood role at Top Meadow [his home in Beaconsfield] because children in that house were as essential as the structure that supported it.



A photo of the author, Sheila Cook, offering her uncle, G.K. Chesterton, a dandelion

I do not remember the occasion of the photograph of myself (taken by Dorothy Collins) offering my uncle a dandelion. What I know for a certainty, however, is the way in which he would have greeted an approach of this kind. There would never be an off-hand or harsh word; far less would there be ridicule at some childish effort. Everything I did or said (and others have had the same experience) was dealt with as seriously and as courteously as if I had been an important adult guest.

From such a genius as 'Big Uncle' it was to be expected that he could turn even a catastrophe into a rich imaginative concept.

Such was the case when I fell into the garden pond at Top Meadow. Why, he asked, in sham puzzlement, had I not turned myself into a goldfish? Wouldn't it have been splendid to have gills and fins and, therefore, to have dealt with the situation calmly and effectively not as a wretchedly miserable dripping little girl.

I remember agreeing, and I had no doubt that if my Uncle said so, it would be possible to turn into a fish. This was not the end of the conversation, and we both entered once more into the fairyland world that we both enjoyed so much. I cannot remember much more of that occasion, except that I quite forgot my damp uncomfortable plight, and also that I was introduced to the idea of mermaids.

Although I did not read about these until much later – indeed then I am sure I could not read at all – I decided that I would prefer to be a mermaid rather than a fish. I would, after all, that way be mostly 'me.' Also, I realized that I would

be able to clamber out of the water with the aid of my hands. The pond had lost some of its enchantment and I didn't like the idea of a lifetime there such as the goldfish enjoyed.

When lunch was over, 'Big Uncle' habitually sat by the huge brick fireplace in the sitting-room. He usually smoked a cigar then. I used to sit on his knee waiting to be given the red paper ring from the cigar to wear on my finger.

This little ritual usually heralded another instalment of our serial. I was the golden-haired princess who had been captured and shut up in the castle of a wicked ogre. A price had to be paid for my release. Now my Aunt had collected for me 'jewels.' They were, in reality, shells, pieces of bottle glass – brown, white and green, ground and rounded smooth by the sea. Also strange pieces of ore-like gold, and black shiny jet stones. One of these I would select reluctantly to appease the Ogre.

If this wonderful story-time world with my Uncle enriched the life of my imagination, my Aunt supported it with a collection of wonderful things kept especially to fascinate children.

There was the miniature garden which needed attention from day to day to freshen it. I remember adding new moss for the lawn, a tiny mirror for a pond and little lead figures performing various horticultural tasks. There was a glass-fronted cupboard full of some of the tiniest things in the world that my Aunt had collected on her travels with my Uncle. There was a wax doll with 'real' golden hair like the lock of 'Big Uncle's' which I had been given. There was a trunk of Spanish glove puppets... I could go on and on.

Lastly, there were knights on horseback, little animals, a roundabout, and many other small toys on the mantelpiece of my Uncle's study. From these he drew inspiration for many of his writings.

One of my earliest memories was bringing to this study my Uncle's 'elevenses' – a piece of toast which I had carefully browned (and sometimes burnt) on a toasting fork in front of the fire. Unpalatable as it must have been at times, it was never rejected.

Mine must have been one of the very few intrusions allowed beyond that door during a busy day where great writing was being prepared for publication. Was it possible that this great and much loved man, besides being a writer and an artist, was also something of a prophet?

The personal and unpublished treasure of these memories suggests that he may have been. ■

These reminiscences first appeared in a Letter to the Editor in The Chesterton Review, Vol.XXII, No.4, November 1996.