

# The DEFENDANT

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'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)

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## Chesterton and the Over-Civilised Culture

by *Karl Schmude*

**M**ore than a century ago, Chesterton made an arresting prediction – that the slide into barbarism would come, not from the abandonment of civilisation, but from over-civilisation.

He observed that “the fads of the cultured grow every day more pleasingly identical with the habits of the barbarian... Over-civilisation and barbarism are within an inch of each other. And a mark of both is the power of medicine-men.” (“Taboos and Prohibitions,” *Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol.28, *Illustrated London News*, 1908-1910. Ignatius Press, 1987)

Chesterton made these remarks in 1909. What would he have made of the surging legalisation of abortion and euthanasia in the contemporary West? These acts are now promoted, not as a regrettable necessity in hard circumstances, but more and more as indisputable human rights, which should be constitutionally guaranteed.

They are only possible, finally, through the professional power and compromising participation of certain “medicine-men”.

No doubt Chesterton would have seen that his prophecy is being fulfilled - to a horrifying extent. The “fads of the cultured” –the wealthy and professional elites – are coming more and more to resemble “the habits of the barbarian”, as our culture resorts increasingly to deliberate killing, at the beginning and at the end of life.



*A pensive Chesterton*

### The myth of inevitable progress

An historically powerful impulse lurks behind Chesterton’s insight into the link between over-civilisation and barbarism – namely, the yearning for inevitable progress.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was in the West an eruption of utopian writing, in both fiction and non-fiction. Science was envisioned as the pathway to irresistible progress – and the assured hope of the future.

H.G. Wells, a popular contemporary of Chesterton, was one of the fathers of science fiction. His dream was inspired, as one biographer noted, by “science as its god, evolution its history, and nature – including man – its congregation.” (Lovat Dickson, *H.G. Wells: His Turbulent Life and Times*, 1969)

Wells’ early expressions of exuberant hope appeared in such books as *Mankind in the Making* (1903) and *A Modern Utopia* (1905). While the destructive horrors of the First World War - such as poisonous gases and artillery bombardments - shook this dream, it did not destroy it. The myth of progress continued – as is clear from the ease with which one side of politics, the left, is still commonly called “the progressive left”.

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Chesterton: "The fads of the cultured grow every day more pleasingly identical with the habits of the barbarian... Over-civilisation and barbarism are within an inch of each other."

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In his closing years – he died in 1946 - Wells lapsed into despair, but of a kind that is peculiarly true of our own time. He embraced a different, 'over-civilised' hope.

In his last book, *Mind at the End of its Tether* (1945), he confessed that he had misread human nature, and that he had "no compelling argument to convince the reader that he should not be cruel or mean or cowardly." His loss of faith in humanity led him to search for a new hope – and conceive of an entirely new species which would be perfect, and would replace the flawed human being in whom he had invested his trust, but who had hugely disappointed him.

But as Chesterton once commented about utopianism: "Hope for the superman is another name for despair of man." It is as if the only counter to the onset of despair is to conjure up even more extravagant earthly hopes.

Chesterton's hope, by contrast, was in man as he *is*, not as he *is imagined to be* – that is, in the world of reality, not in the dreams of fantasy. As he once argued, what is most valuable and lovable in our eyes (and, he implied, in God's eyes) "is man – the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable man."

And he went on, in one of his most majestic passages of prose:

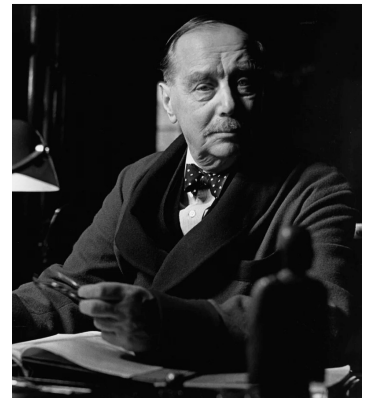
"The things that have been founded on the fancy of the Superman have died with the dying civilizations which alone have given them birth. When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing His great society, He chose for its cornerstone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a 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."  
(*Heretics*, 1905)

### **False gods and false devils**

A second Chesterton prophecy in his 1909 essay was that the essence of barbarism was idolatry. "Idolatry is committed," he wrote, "not merely by setting up false gods, but also by setting up false devils."



H.G. Wells

Chesterton singled out the earthly fears that can readily take grip of people, such as the fear of "war or alcohol or economic law," when he thought there were far greater reasons for fear: "they should be afraid of spiritual corruption and cowardice."

The setting up of false gods inevitably calls for false devils. Devils tend to induce a pervasive sense of fear, which, in turn, serves to reinforce the worship of false gods.

Chesterton could hardly have foreseen how easily our culture would come to be gripped by fear and easily "offended", and how strongly legislative measures and policing practices would be enforced to prevent people being "offended". If the god being worshipped is imagined, it can only be protected from scrutiny by imagined devils.

Our own age abounds in false devils, which are bound to incite fear. A culture that falls for illusions inevitably becomes a fearful culture.

Probably the most insistent of today's fears, especially for the young, is climate change, but others relate to the atmosphere generated by the rise of 'wokeism' and the playing out of identity politics, mainly of race and gender. Curiously they rarely touch the category of class, which was such a dominant category of Marxist discrimination. This could be because the woke elites are actually among the wealthiest in society, and assuage their guilt over such privilege by defending, at a distance, the plight of the poor.

Chesterton's prophecy is tragically coming to pass. The "fads of the cultured" are now becoming identical with "the habits of the barbarian". ■

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**Layout of 'The Defendant' designed by Jenna Fulop**

## **Society Membership**

The annual membership fee of the Australian Chesterton Society is **\$35.00**, which entitles subscribers to receive the Society's quarterly newsletter, *The Defendant*.

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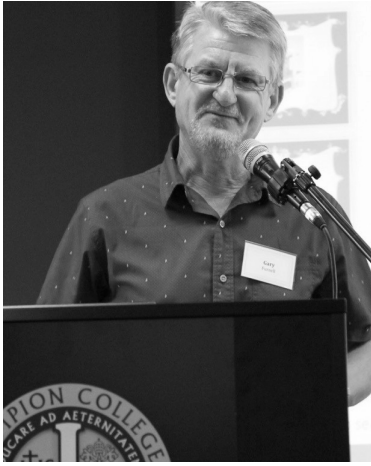
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Gary Furnell

# Chesterton's Fence - and the Secular View of Time

by Gary Furnell

An oft-quoted Chesterton insight is that it is unwise to pull down a fence which seems obstructive before establishing why it was put there in the first place. **Gary Furnell**, the Australian Chesterton Society's Secretary-Treasurer and a frequent contributor to various journals such as *Quadrant* and *News Weekly*, explores the prevailing view of time that lies behind the secular attitude to reform.

This is an edited version of an article first published in *News Weekly* (January 22, 2024), edited by Peter Kelleher, and is reprinted with his kind permission.

*"There exists in such a case a certain institution or law; let us say, for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, 'I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away.' To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: 'If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it.'" (G.K. Chesterton, "The Drift from Domesticity," *The Thing*, 1929).*

**T**ime is part of man's intangible environment. Our attitude to time and its passing is in large measure determined by what we believe.

The Judeo-Christian faith posits a good creator sustaining everything in love, including each human being, and the creator's provisions embody this goodness. Time can be seen as a gift that *allows* our lives.

A secular person is likely to view time with ambivalence. The passing of time, and the end of life in death, can be seen to subject all hopes, passions and achievements to change and decay. And, as the secular dogma maintains, there's no beneficent, unchanging, knowable God to redeem anyone's life and attainments from futility and nothingness.

This secular faith is in large part responsible for the void of meaning, purpose and significance that is draining our civilization of much of its energy, good sense, well-being and confidence.

Although *secularism* has come to refer to an ideology that scoffs at transcendent spirituality, Chesterton noted that the Latin-derived word 'secular' doesn't mean irreligious or worldly, but 'dated' or 'of the age'.

## **A focus on the present, ignoring the distant past or distant future**

It's the present together with the recent past and near future—indifferent to any eternity—that is often the primary focus of

secular people. They will be hesitant about embracing too much of the *distant* past—an embarrassing admixture of cruelty and inadequate goodness—or the *distant* future that, apart from culminating in death, is uncertain and therefore fuels anxiety as much as hope.

Pope Francis, in his book *Happiness in this Life*, said the present-focussed life is *provisional*:

"The culture of provisionality does not increase our liberty, but deprives us of our true destiny, of truer and more authentic goals. It is a life in pieces. It is sad to reach a certain age, look at the path we have taken and find that it has been made of different pieces, without unity, without finality; entirely provisional..."

Man is a finite creature dependent on time's succession. We don't know anything fully or immediately. What we may know among the many mysteries of life, we learn gradually.

There's no such thing as Instant Knowledge in a therapeutic, mystical, pharmaceutical or philosophical form. Reflection on one's experience, good teaching, humility and persistence in the search for knowledge *over decades* is required.

The fact that knowledge is acquired slowly means that hasty decisions are rarely good decisions. Time advises us - *Despite the pressure of events, wait and watch, test and discern before any decision so that the best path is chosen, even if the delay means that some people continue a little longer in their distress.*

Of course, the pressure to act is immense if lives are at risk. But even in crises, it's best to take time to ask hard questions, to examine, to sift the evidence. Ill-considered action may make the situation worse; it may harm the innocent and empower the selfish; it may result in greater suffering or lost lives at a later stage. Time must be allowed to do its illuminating, differentiating work.

In public life, impatience is not a minor fault; it is a major folly. Impatience is a fatal characteristic of nearly all activists. We hear them shout: *We want action NOW!* ■



Hilaire Belloc

# Chesterton's Other Brother

by Joseph Pearce



Joseph Pearce

While it is well known that Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton were comrades-in-arms in support of Distributism and other causes, **Joseph Pearce**

offers a fresh perspective on their relationship by calling Belloc "Chesterton's other brother".

Joseph is a Senior Contributor at *The Imaginative Conservative*, the online journal in which this article first appeared (on February 20, 2023). It is here reprinted with his kind permission. He is the author of many acclaimed biographies, including *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton (1996)* and *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc (2015)*. Among his other scholarly roles is serving as Editor of the *St Austin Review*, an international journal of Catholic culture, literature, and ideas.

In a previous essay, "Arguing with Chesterton" (*The Imaginative Conservative*, February 15, 2023), I quoted Chesterton's words about his relationship with his brother Cecil. "We were always arguing," Chesterton had written, "but we never quarrelled."

Chesterton spent his whole life arguing without quarrelling, not merely with his brother but with anyone with whom he cared to cross swords in controversy. There was, however, one man with whom he neither argued nor quarrelled, who was like a brother to him, a comrade in arms. This was Hilaire Belloc, whom Chesterton had first met in 1900.

"When I first met Belloc," Chesterton wrote, "he remarked ... that he was in low spirits," adding that Belloc's "low spirits were and are much more uproarious and enlivening than anybody else's high spirits."

Belloc held forth well into the night. "What he brought ... was his Roman appetite for reality and for reason in action, and when he came to the door there entered with him the smell of danger."

Reason in action and the smell of danger. In these words Chesterton unlocked two characteristics of Belloc which encapsulated the latter's persona and presence. His was a lively intellect which expressed itself pugilistically. Furthermore, Belloc had satisfied his appetite for reality in ways that the sedentary Chesterton had only experienced vicariously in books.

Chesterton dreamed of the adventure, Belloc was the adventurer. Chesterton imagined the excitement of the high seas, Belloc was an accomplished sailor. Chesterton imagined the bravery of battle, Belloc had been a soldier in the French army. Chesterton imagined the exhilaration of exploring wild frontiers, Belloc had tramped across the United States, discovering the "Wild West" in the 1890s and, in the year following his first meeting with Chesterton, would hike from northern France, across the alps, to Rome, immortalizing his 750-mile pilgrimage in his masterpiece, *The Path to Rome* (1902).

In addition, Belloc was already a successful published author at the time of his first meeting with Chesterton, whereas

Chesterton was just embarking on his journalistic career. Finally, and not of least importance, Belloc was a married man and a pater familias, whereas Chesterton was yet to marry and would never receive the blessing of children.

## Belloc – a mentor to Chesterton

As the foregoing suggests, Chesterton was somewhat in awe of this man of reason and action, four years his senior, and it would be fair to say that Belloc became something of a mentor, for better or worse.

One harmful effect of Belloc's influence was a naively simplistic sympathy for the French Revolution. Belloc had written a biography of Danton a year prior to his first meeting with Chesterton in which he had sought to defend the revolutionary and the Revolution. Eight years after his befriending of Belloc, Chesterton would praise the French Revolution as being "a manly mutiny against pride".

Begging to differ, I wrote in my last essay, "Arguing with Chesterton", that the Revolution was not so much a manly mutiny against pride as a prideful mutiny against God.

It would, however, be very unjust to see Belloc's influence on Chesterton as being wholly negative. We cannot agree with C.S. Lewis that Belloc was "always, on the intellectual side, a disastrous influence on Chesterton". On the contrary, Chesterton's political philosophy, which Lewis himself praises implicitly in *That Hideous Strength*, was a fruit of his friendship with Belloc.

Known as distributism, Chesterton held that the only alternative to the proletarianization of society was a proprietary political economy in which as many people as possible should be owners of private productive property.

After Chesterton had accepted the presidency of the Distributist League, he wrote an "Open Letter" to Belloc acknowledging Belloc's pioneering role in popularizing distributism: "You were the founder and father of this mission; we were the converts but you were the missionary... you first revealed the truth both to its greater and its lesser servants.... Great will be your glory if England breathes again."

In point of fact, Belloc was not the formulator of the distributist creed, even if he does warrant the praise Chesterton heaps upon him as being the founder and father of the mission. The ideas which formed Belloc's political philosophy were an articulation of Catholic teaching, which Belloc had learned from Cardinal Manning and especially from Pope Leo XIII's social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which had been issued in 1891.

Distributism is essentially a practically applicable way of understanding politics and economics in the light of the pope's teaching on subsidiarity and solidarity. This was part of what Chesterton had called Belloc's "Roman appetite for reality and for reason in action" which had so attracted Chesterton from the first and which would enable Chesterton to see the Europe of the Faith which Belloc knew well and which he championed vociferously.

### **Chesterton on the path to Rome**

On Christmas Eve in 1900, a few months after their first meeting, Chesterton accompanied Hilaire and Elodie Belloc to midnight Mass, almost certainly Chesterton's first attendance at a Catholic Mass. Six months before embarking on his own

perambulatory path to Rome, Belloc was clearly instrumental in setting Chesterton on the latter's own path to Rome.

Having surveyed the extent of Belloc's influence on Chesterton, we might be tempted to agree with Frank Sheed's statement that "Belloc had so much to do with the making of Chesterton and Chesterton not much with the making of Belloc". Such a judgment is thrown into question by the degree to which Belloc came to depend on Chesterton as the latter grew in both faith and stature.

In later years, Belloc would describe Chesterton as "the Master" and would consider him "a thinker so profound and so direct that he had no equal".

In many respects, Hilaire Belloc can be seen as Chesterton's other brother, with whom he neither argued nor quarrelled. Such fraternal friendships are forged in faith and find their fulfilment in heaven.

We can be sure, therefore, that, irrespective of their sins and weaknesses, they are now not merely brothers in arms but brothers in the arms of the Lord. ■

## **Tributes to Two Chestertonians - Aidan Mackey and Ray Finnegan**

*The Chesterton family worldwide has recently lost two Chesterton champions - **Aidan Mackey**, who died on May 4 in England, and **Ray Finnegan**, who died on January 11 in Canberra. The Australian Chesterton Society shares the sadness now being felt by their families, and offers a grateful tribute to each of them.*

**Aidan Mackey** was one of the pioneers of the modern Chesterton revival. Almost alone in England, he reawakened an appreciation of Chesterton's life and works.

I first met Aidan in 1985 at his home in Bedford, a market town north of London, from where he sold second-hand Chesterton and Belloc books (many of which I bought), while also directing a G.K. Chesterton Study Centre.

His comprehensive collection of Chesterton-related books and memorabilia was later moved to Oxford. Most recently it has found a new home in London, where – as Chris Rule highlighted in *The Defendant* (Summer 2024) - it is part of the London campus of the University of Notre Dame (USA).

In his closing years he would sign his letters "Ancient Aidan", by which he wryly highlighted the grand age of 100 that he had reached in 2022. But I think it also pointed to his profound affinity with the age of Chesterton, whose genius he helped to make less ancient and more accessible over a long lifetime.

Though he did not know Chesterton, Aidan had personal memories of the Chesterton era. He knew his long-serving secretary, Dorothy Collins, who was Chesterton's literary executor for half a century after his death in 1936. Aidan published numerous articles, including in the pages

of *The Defendant*, such as one on Dorothy Collins, and another on the town of Beaconsfield where Chesterton lived in his later years.

I have a special memory of visiting Beaconsfield on one occasion with Aidan. He took me to Chesterton's first home, Top Meadow, and also his graveside. I learnt more deeply how much Chesterton loved the character and individual beauty of this small town.

He was generous to Chesterton movements worldwide, such as John Kanu's Chesterton Centre in Sierra Leone. Aidan's long interest in Chesterton's social and economic philosophy of Distributism induced him to foster the growth of local co-operatives in one of Africa's poorest countries.

The Australian Chesterton Society is indebted to Aidan for many kindnesses, including donations that he would send at various times in support of our efforts.

May his soul rest in peace.

***For the tribute to Ray Finnegan, please see page 7***



*Aidan Mackey (right) on the occasion of his 100th birthday, in company with the President of The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Dale Ahlquist*

# The Chestertons in Children's Literature

In recent years **Nancy Brown**, a prominent member of *The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton in America* and the biographer of Chesterton's wife, Frances, has published two children's books incorporating Gilbert and Frances as characters. **Gary Furnell** reviews the two books, and highlights how they illustrate the special value of children's literature.



Nancy Brown speaking on the subject of her 2015 biography, *Frances Chesterton*, at the 2018 Australian Chesterton Conference at Campion College

Nancy Brown has multiple non-fiction books to her credit, including *The Woman Who Was Chesterton* (2015), an excellent biography of Frances Chesterton, Gilbert's beloved wife, and *G.K. Chesterton and Our Lady: Readings and Essays on Chesterton's Spiritual Life* (2022).

Nancy has also written two adaptations of Father Brown stories for children. Her first *original* chapter book for 8-10-year-olds was *The Chestertons and the Golden Key* (2016). There is now a worthy sequel, *The Chestertons and the Top Meadow Troupe* (2023), aimed at 10-14-year-old readers.

Both books are beautiful; they are high-quality publications. Each page has a frame around the text and subtle ornamental details abound, giving a sense of careful attention to presentation. In addition to colourful cover art, illustrator Ann Kissane Engelhart has augmented the story with frequent drawings to help younger readers visualise the characters and their context.



There's nothing blandly utilitarian in the production. This focused creativity reflects the stories which feature artistic efforts in the form of puppet plays, music, poetry, baking, handicrafts, home theatrics and story-writing.

Although the stories are imagined, the novels are based on real people — the Chestertons and the Nicholl family — in real settings:

the small towns of Lyme Regis and Beaconsfield in England during the 1920s.

In *The Chestertons and the Golden Key*—the first, slimmer novel (130 pages)—Gilbert and Frances, middle-aged, enjoying Gilbert's success as a writer, holiday at the coast in Lyme Regis. They meet a local family, the Nicholls: three girls and their widowed mother live in a seaside cottage. The girls, aged 8, 10 and 11, are lively and excited by the dreams of achievement for the years ahead.

The Nicholls befriend the Chestertons. The Nicholl girls and their lonely mother enjoy the humour, solicitude and imagination of the Chestertons, while Frances and Gilbert delight in the Nicholl's friendly vivacity. Two local boys and the Nicholl's thieving dog provide the necessary degree of story-propelling tension and intrigue.

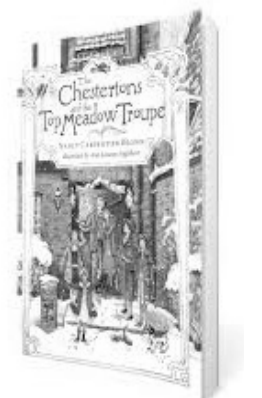
## Characters triumphing over difficulties

Nancy Brown knows that the best children's stories present their characters with difficulties to help young readers understand that difficulties can be overcome. Good stories also suggest the attitudes and strategies that aid this triumph. In *The Chestertons and the Golden Key*, it becomes evident that Gilbert and Frances have overcome the grief and disappointment of childlessness. They coped with this sadness by cultivating loving relationships with their nieces, nephews, and the children of their many friends.

The Nicholl family must cope with the death of their husband and father. Mrs Nicholl struggles with bereavement; she neglects family enjoyments that once brought pleasure. Her grief impacts her daughters but she finds a modest liberation from her sadness by the story's end which centres on music and a puppet play. The Chestertons are central to this evening of song and theatre, while cheerful neighbours are the audience.

The longer sequel, *The Chestertons and the Top Meadow Troupe*, (243 pages) is set the following Christmas time. The Nicholl family holiday at Beaconsfield where the Chestertons have their home, *Top Meadow*.

Again, there are mysteries for the girls to solve: who is sending their mother frequent letters? Who are the comatose men, recently injured in a shipping disaster, cared for by nuns in Beaconsfield's small convalescent home?



There are also difficulties for the girls to overcome: the proximity of a rude girl in the Chesterton's circle; the alarming possibility of change as a man courts Mrs Nicholl; and the frustrating effort required to write a coherent story suitable for publication in a girls' magazine.

The girls enjoy the company of Chesterton's young cousin, spending his school holidays at Beaconsfield. The good-natured lad is a talented mimic, adept at imitating the voices of Aunt Frances and Uncle Gilbert. Their household is rich with playful pranks, good sense, many pets, and lots of food.

Although the Nicholl girls are the main characters in both books, boys are likely to enjoy the stories because there's more than enough adventure and comedy to engage their interest. The stories are well-paced and the style reveals a delight in language.

There's a quiet emphasis on kindness, realism and artistic endeavour, even though misunderstanding and tragedy

may temporarily darken our days. Religious adherence is portrayed as natural and good, and this is achieved without intrusive authorial pronouncements. It's a shrewd strategy. Christmas services are attended, a nativity scene adorns the Chesterton's living room, and the presence of French nuns is an accepted part of the suburban setting.

The small mysteries in the stories are resolved, but there's the sense that the ultimate mysteries of life will—thankfully—persist.

Nancy Brown's children's books combine readability, imagination, and child-scaled but real drama with the values that Frances and Gilbert Chesterton embodied: humour, hospitality and creativity.

The books would be excellent birthday, Confirmation or Christmas gifts, worthwhile additions to any library, and valuable home-schooling resources. ■

## Tribute to Ray Finnegan (1935-2024)

by *Karl Schmude*

**Ray Finnegan** (pictured) played a crucial part in the development of the Australian Chesterton Society.

He served as our Secretary-Treasurer for almost the entire life of the Society after it was established as a national body in 2000 - from its origins in 1993 as a State-based association, founded by Tony Evans, in Western Australia - and Ray himself retired in 2018.

Ray had an early interest in the Father Brown stories, which led to a wider interest in Chesterton's writings. He soon tackled *Orthodoxy*. When he heard of the formation of a Chesterton Society in Western Australia, he contacted Tony Evans and enrolled as a member, even though he initially had no means of participating in the Society's activities in Western Australia.

In 2001, Ray attended the annual conference of the Society which was held at St Joseph's College in Sydney. He recalled that he went intending to be a happy 'back-bencher', but came away as Secretary Treasurer 'after succumbing to the blandishments of Tony Evans and Karl Schmude'!

Throughout the years Ray took professional care of all membership matters, including renewal payments

and conference fees. As a citizen of Canberra, he organised the annual conference held in the national capital in 2002. He was always

vitaly involved in arrangements for the Society's other conferences, most of which have taken place at Campion College in Sydney.

When not engaged with things Chestertonian, Ray was a senior public servant in the Department of Defence. In 1991 he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for public service.

Ray was also a devoted family man. He married Angela (Travia) in 1965 at St Mary's Cathedral in Perth, where Angela had been an organist. She was also an accomplished pianist, and together they raised a family of four children - Maria, Angela, Christine and Stephen.

Ray served the Chesterton cause in Australia wonderfully well. He has an honoured place in the history of our Society, which could so easily have floundered over the years without his wise counsel and his careful sense of custodianship. May his soul rest in peace.





# The Spiritual Life of an Atheist

## George Bernard Shaw and a Benedictine Nun

by Karl Schmude

Left: Shaw and Chesterton at a famous debate on socialism and distributism, "Do We Agree?", which Belloc (centre) chaired.

The playwright and social critic, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), was a long-time admirer of Chesterton, whom he described as "a colossal genius". Their friendship transcended their disagreements on virtually every subject, particularly religious faith, as Shaw was a professed atheist.

Yet a little-known fact about Shaw, which brings a certain nuance to his presumed disbelief in God, is that he had an even less likely friendship. This was with a cloistered nun, Dame Laurentia McLachlan (1866-1953), who was Abbess of the Benedictine Abbey of Stanbrook in England. They met through a mutual friend after Dame Laurentia had expressed admiration of Shaw's play, *St Joan* (1923). Following a visit which Shaw and his wife made to Stanbrook, Dame Laurentia wrote:

"It seems that the life here, and therefore the Church does attract him. God give me grace to help this poor wanderer..." Later Shaw sent her a copy of *St. Joan* inscribed: "To Sister Laurentia from Brother Bernard." The friendship flourished, mainly by correspondence that addressed issues of Christianity and faith. Excerpts from these letters proved of wider interest. They were published in book, *In a Great Tradition* (1956). They also appeared in magazines in England and America at the time. Later they formed the basis of a stage play by Hugh Whitmore, *The Best of Friends* (1988).

### Religious longings – and the freedom of the enclosed life

The letters shed a telling light on Shaw's religious needs - and his understanding of the value of a cloistered life.

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

From the Holy Land he brought back two pebbles, "one to be thrown blindfold among the others in Stanbrook garden so that there may always be a stone from Bethlehem there, though nobody will know which it is and be tempted to steal it, and the other for your own self."

The second stone he had mounted on a silver model of a mediaeval reliquary, surmounted by a figure of the child Jesus. When it was suggested that it bear some kind of inscription, he wrote: "Why can it not be a secret between

us and Our Lady and the little boy? What the devil-saving your cloth - could we put on it? ... Our fingerprints are on it, and Heaven knows whose footprints may be on the stone. Isn't that enough?"

Again and again Shaw asked for the nuns' prayers: "Nobody can tell what influence these prayers may have. If the ether is full of these impulses of goodwill to me so much the better for me: it would be shockingly unscientific to doubt it. So let the Sisters give me all the prayers they can spare; and don't forget me in yours."

Shaw's sardonic allegory, *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (1932), tested his friendship with Dame Laurentia, though he insisted that it was directly inspired by God. He wrote on the flyleaf of the proof sheets he sent her: "An Inspiration which came in response to the prayers of the nuns of Stanbrook Abbey and in particular to the prayers of his dear Sister Laurentia for Bernard Shaw."

But they argued over it by mail. "You are the most unreasonable woman I ever knew ...". wrote Shaw in frustration. "You think you are a better Catholic than I, but my view of the Bible is the view of the Fathers of the Church; and yours is that of a Belfast Protestant to whom the Bible is a fetish. ... But you must go on praying for me, however surprising the results may be."

Towards the close of his long life, the elderly Shaw would pause happily on his birthday, among the scrap baskets full of congratulations, to thank his cloistered friend for her good wishes:

"If I try to sneak into paradise behind you they will be too glad to see you to notice me," he wrote once.

His 94<sup>th</sup> and last birthday marked the end of these exchanges: "God must be tired of all these prayers for this fellow Shaw whom He doesn't half like. He has promised His servant Laurentia that He will do His best for him, and we had better leave it at that." ■



Dame Laurentia McLachlan