



Conferencia Internacional
(Primera Iberoamericana)

CHESTERTON
Y LA EVANGELIZACIÓN DE LA CULTURA

Buenos Aires, 21 al 24 de septiembre 2005

Chesterton, Journalism and Modern English Culture

Sheridan Gilley

Conferencia pronunciada el día jueves 22 de septiembre

Sociedad Chestertoniana Argentina

Agüero 1287 Capital Federal CP (1425EMC) - Tel/Fax (54-11) 4961 6847

sca@SociedadChestertonianaArgentina.org

www.SociedadChestertonianaArgentina.org

It is important to remember that Gilbert Keith Chesterton was, in his own words, “a jolly journalist”: that he was not primarily a novelist or a poet or an essayist, though he was also all those things, but a man who earned his living from writing for and editing newspapers. His wife tried to rescue him from a life among editors, presses and printers in London by removing him in 1909 to the rural quiet of Beaconsfield, and some have criticised the misplacement of his creative energies, which should have been given to producing books, on editing the small-circulation periodicals the *New Witness* and *G. K.'s Weekly*, or scribbling the weekly essays which over thirty-one years appeared in the *Illustrated London News*. Of some of the journalism of Chesterton's last decade, A. L. Maycock wrote, **“what waste of time and effort for a mind like his”** But many of Chesterton's books grew out of journal articles or stories or appeared first in newspapers, like his two works on Ireland, *Irish Impressions* and *Christendom in Dublin*. He operated here on the sound commercial principle that what had sold once would sell again, and if his medium was print, he was devoted to newsprint most of all.

Thus like any journalist, Chesterton wrote for the occasion. He has an hilarious essay on the way in which the combination of the journalist's procrastination and the newspaper deadline results in error, and another on how the **“blind idolatry of speed”** makes it impossible for newspapers to grasp the truth. Yet **“I could be a journalist because I not help being a controversialist”**, he wrote, and many of his best comic or satiric verses were inspired by immediate controversies, like the immortal **“Antichrist, or the Reunion of Christendom: An Ode”**, beginning **“Are they clinging to their crosses, F.E. Smith?”**, ridiculing an unlucky piece of hyperbole by the future Earl of Birkenhead which enabled Chesterton to extract the humour from the unlikely subject of the Welsh Church Disestablishment Bill. Smith had ventured rashly into an area on which he could hardly claim authority, **“the souls of Christian people”**, and here as elsewhere, it was Chesterton's special gift to throw a devastating squib at a passing piece of pomposity. Thus the chapter in *Orthodoxy* entitled **“The Ethics of Elfland”** began in his attack in the *Illustrated London News* on the Duchess of Somerset for urging the abolition of teaching fairy tales in schools, when Chesterton thought that fairy tales offered a profounder truth than ordinary history, indeed a truth profounder than the Duchess of Somerset herself. Chesterton's early works like *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy* are deeply rooted in the journalistic culture of their time, having their origins in his joustings; with other popular writers in newspapers, some of them considerable figures like H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, but most of them, like the anti-Catholic Joseph McCabe or Robert Blatchford, editor of the Socialist journal *The Clarion*, now one with Nineveh and Tyre, as lost to view as Lyonesse beneath the sea.

The reputations of most journalists die with their generation, like summer flowers, but the idea of the mere journalist, the commentator or celebrant of ephemera, vastly underestimates their importance in the modern world. Chesterton's life coincided with the height of the English press in its role as the so-called Fourth Estate, a phrase attributed by Thomas Carlyle to Edmund Burke but probably Victorian in origin, and in position of cultural predominance in English life. Chesterton's own life-time was the age of the Yellow Press, a term first applied in 1895 to the *New York World* from its cartoon depicting 'The Yellow Kid', a child in yellow costume, which was at first an experiment in colour printing, but which came to symbolise the paper's lurid contents. Thus it was the 1890s that saw the emergence of the first 'press barons' of this new

and murky realm, the great newspaper proprietors, the Irish Harmsworth brothers who became Viscount Northcliffe and Viscount Rothermere, who together created the Daily Mail and bought *The Times*, and later, of the Canadian Baron Beaverbrook, owner of the Daily Express, who was so deliciously denounced by the conservative politician Stanley Baldwin in Kipling's words as exercising "**Power without responsibility: the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages**". Their megalomaniac ruthlessness reached a peak of notoriety in the United States with William Randolph Hearst. Thus the leading satirists made mock of them in the persons of their great fictional equivalents. These include John Buchan's Thomas Carlyle Craw, whose power is immense but whose life is dominated by the fear of being embarrassed by his journalistic rivals, to the point of declining the usual obligatory peerage; Evelyn Waugh's Lord Copper of **Scoop**, with whom his minions can only disagree, by agreeing with him up to point; and P. G. Wodehouse's Lord Tilbury of the Mammoth Publishing Company, whose chief aim is the suppression of an embarrassing memoir which is in part about him, and which is, appropriately, eaten by a pig. None of these is a hero, and in Evelyn Waugh's immortal words, mingling fastidiousness with snobbery, "**the daily press has sunk to a condition when it is a profession not only unsuitable to a gentleman but to an Englishman ...**"

Yet these were the new lords of humankind. As another journalist and writer of genius, Rudyard Kipling, declared in his wonderful account of the revenge of some pressmen in manufacturing the tale of "**The Village that Voted the Earth was Flat**":

**The Pope may launch his Interdict,
The Union its decree,
But the bubble is blown and the bubble is pricked
By Us and such as We.
Remember the battle and stand aside
While Thrones and Powers confess
That King over all the children of pride
Is the Press - the Press - the Press!**

The press seemed to hold the highest power in the land. As Chesterton's great friend Hilaire Belloc wrote of Lord Lundy:

**We had intended you to be
The next Prime Minister but three:
The stocks were sold; the Press was squared;
The Middle Class was quite prepared.**

"**Squaring the Press**" had replaced the old monarchic device of tuning the pulpits, of telling the public what to think through their priests, and had already become one of the great black arts of the new democratic age.

Chesterton called the Yellow Press the "**drab press**", for its unwillingness either to indulge in a proper sensationalism, which he personally enjoyed, the healthy sensationalism of the detective

story or of the old crime novels called “**penny dreadfuls**”, or to attack the real injustices of life or abuse of power. He called the typical writer for the Harmsworth press “**a man who writes things on the back of advertisements**”, or in the self-satisfied words of an editor of *The Times* to the sometime journalist John Morley, “**You left journalism a profession; we have made it a branch of commerce**”. Chesterton notes in his *Autobiography* that recently a newspaper proprietor had remarked to him that “**A newspaper office is now exactly like any other business**”, and that he had agreed with a groan. “**It is conducted as quietly, as soberly, as sensibly**”, he wrote, “**as the office of any successful moneylender, or moderately fraudulent successful financier**”, and partook of the profit-and-loss cut-throat character of capitalism itself.

Indeed Chesterton's very style, its verbal brilliancy, its invocation of the strangeness of things, its love of paradox, its genius for metaphor, was directed at the flabbiness of contemporary journalistic prose and its substitution for the awe and wonder of the cosmos of a false flat view of the external world. Yet Chesterton thought that ideally, a journalist who by the very nature of his craft deals with the everyday ought to discern how extraordinary it is. The journalist should by his ordinary activities have the gift of extracting the magical from the commonplace. For Chesterton, a thing had to be seen with the imagination to be truly seen; it had to be vivid to be true. He was trained as an artist, and had an artist's eye for colour; you could say for Technicolor as well.

Chesterton believed that this underlies the truth of religion. The Enlightenment had found the universal claims of Christianity dubious because it was given at a particular time and place to a particular people and through a particular Person. Chesterton, reared in the high-sounding vagueness of liberal Unitarianism, the heir to Platonism and Germanic idealism, thought that Christianity was proven by its particularity, as a story, and told his readers not to believe in anything which can't be told in coloured pictures.

The resort to abstraction was a mark of journalistic dishonesty. Chesterton's portrait of his fictional editor Edward Nott, of the *Daily Reformer*, in the Father Brown story *The Purple Wig*, is too unkind to have been based directly on his own kindly editor, A. G. Gardiner, at the *Daily News*, but it depicts this determination of the great press lords not to disturb the reading public, by feeding them on an anodyne prose which replaces the general term for the individual one. Thus Nott automatically substitutes the drab and colourless word for the concrete and colourful one in the copy before him: “**adultery**” becomes “**impropriety**”, “**shoot down**” becomes “**repress**”, while “**supernatural**” is secularised as “**marvellous**” and “**God**” as “**circumstances**”.

There was good reason for this caution: Nott, as Chesterton describes him, lived in a state of continuous “**fear of libel actions, fear of lost advertisements, fear of misprints, fear of the sack**.” His life was “**a series of distracted compromises**” between his staff and his proprietor, “**a senile soapboiler**” for whom the news had to be managed in his political party's interest and to win him a title. The reference to the “**senile soap-boiler**” was probably a hit at the soap-manufacturer Sir William Lever, who threatened Chesterton with a libel action for describing his model workers' town of Port Sunlight as “**corresponding to a Slave**”.

Compound!" Lever was an excellent employer by the standards of the time, but his employees, though cosseted, were denied such basic English freedoms as an inn or a public house in which to drink beer. Chesterton saw the right to get drunk as a primary liberty. Like the Victorian Archbishop Magee, he preferred England free to England sober. Some of his best poems are drinking songs. He seems to have found Lever's sort of teetotal paternalism, embodied in the coldly idealistic character of Lord Ivywood in *The Flying Inn*, who wants to abolish alcohol in England, as more pernicious than a harsh and exploitative factory regime which made no such pretence to benevolence.

The great newspaper proprietors have become even more powerful, prominent and unpleasant in our own day, such as the Australian-born Rupert Murdoch, wooed and feted by major politicians, and any consideration of the character of English culture must now treat what is peddled in newspapers. The popular press is even more a kind of opiate than it was in Chesterton's time, being devoted almost entirely to entertainment and to the cultus of sportsmen, film stars and other "celebrities". The quality newspapers have a certain social status and power, but this is still, as Baldwin said, power without responsibility. Thus the press in Britain tends to have only one story about the Catholic Church, and that is about paedophilia, though this was recently crossed, in an abrupt *volte face*, as yet to be explained, by its lavish and sympathetic coverage of the late Pope's death and funeral, which gave the equally misleading impression for a few days afterwards that England was a Catholic country.

Yet even then, there was a current of unease about this sudden Roman enthusiasm, and there was some extreme hostility to Rome in the better-class dailies. Indeed a large part of the Church's problem in modern Britain is that high culture, both in print and on film, is dominated by a metropolitan elite of journalists hostile to Christianity. It is remarkable how far the British intellectual classes, so-called, are influenced by the modern princes of the press, the columnists on the principal middle class dailies, so that what Polly Toynbee writes about religion in *The Guardian*, or Matthew Parris in *The Times*, to mention only two of the principal enemies of Christianity in our day, is taken with proper seriousness, even though they write out of an embittered hatred. In short, to modify Shelley, journalists rather than poets are now the legislators of mankind, though they cannot be called unacknowledged ones.

There is a paradox here: that in spite of their influence, and the general lowering of the esteem in which British society now holds doctors, lawyers and priests, - all have been the subject of recent scandals, - journalists have a very low rating in national surveys of the prestige of the professions, ranking somewhere at the bottom of the social hierarchy of public respect, with estate agents and politicians. The satirical magazine *Private Eye* calls its fellow journalists reptiles. It calls Fleet Street the 'Street of Shame', Fleet Street being still a way of referring to the press, as in Chesterton's lifetime it was the place in London where national newspapers were printed and published. The best known of recent attacks on the calling is by J.K. Rowling in one of her celebrated Harry Potter novels, in her portrait of the slimy and devious Rita Skeeter. The common view of the journalist as 'hired hack' - 'hack' is now chiefly a synonym for pressman - was summed up by one of Chesterton's near contemporaries, Humbert Wolfe:

**You cannot hope to bribe or twist,
Thank God! The British journalist.
But, seeing what the man will do,
Unbribed, there's no occasion to.**

Chesterton put it just as bluntly in 1909: **"It is by this time practically impossible to get the truth out of the newspaper, even the honest newspapers ... I mean the kind of truth that a man can feel an intelligent curiosity about moral truth, truth that is disputed, truth that is in action and really affecting things"**.

Where Wolfe seemed to blame the journalists for this, Chesterton chiefly blames their employers. As early as 1905, he wrote in *Heretics* that for purposes of real public opinion **"the press is now a mere plutocratic oligarchy controlled by rich men"**. In a celebrated poem, **"When I came back to Fleet Street"**, he called his fellow-journalists the **"Prisoners of the Flee"**t, in an allusion to the former Fleet Prison, which was once used to house debtors, and had imprisoned Dickens's Mr Pickwick of *The Pickwick Papers*. Chesterton describes its journalists as prisoners held there by their employers to do their will, as no better than slaves who wrote what they were told to write from their need for a crust:

**But old things held: the laughter, The long unnatural night,
And all the truths they talk in hell,
And all the lies they write.
They did not break the padlocks, Or clear the wall away
The men in debt who drank of old
Still drink in debt today;
Chained to the rich by ruin,
Cheerful in chains, as then
When old unbroken Pickwick walked
Among the broken men.**

Yet Chesterton's affection for journalists, **"the broken men"**, the characters of his youth who were eccentric but honest, was as real as his contempt, and it has been richly rewarded; he is still a great man to his fellow journalists. In this, there is a tremendous contrast between his popular and academic reputations. As the publisher's reader of his book on Browning discovered, he lacked the scholarly temperament of accuracy in small things, and could never be bothered to check his dates or quotations. His writings stand nowhere in academia: I have hardly seen a single university course which studies him. He usually despised professors as narrow specialists and guardians of an elite tradition, who discounted the opinions of the people; who would always make the correction and missed the point:

**The sages have a hundred maps to give
That trace their crawling cosmos like a tree,
They rattle reason out through many a sieve
That stores the sand and lets the gold go free;**

***And all these things are less than dust to me
Because my name is Lazarus and I live.***

For Chesterton, as for man on the street, there was a contradiction between scholarship and life. Chesterton's scorn of professors has been repaid in the universities, if not in kind, by ignorance and indifference. But an Internet search of recent British newspaper references to him shows that he is still widely quoted, and that it is his fellow journalists who quote him and honour his memory.

His conviction, however, that the journalism of the day was in conflict with the truth, had its origin in his disillusionment with his own early newspaper the *Daily News* and its owner George Cadbury, the Quaker chocolate and cocoa manufacturer, the prince of the so-called 'Cocoa press', and the high priest of the liberalism of Chesterton's own childhood. Chesterton's Socialist friend George Bernard Shaw once referred to him as ***“that flourishing property of Mr Cadbury”***, but Chesterton was increasingly disillusioned with Cadbury's liberalism, a liberalism which he saw as a cause of corruption and a financial ramp for the exploitation of the poor, in a conspiracy of which the press was now a part. As the maker of cocoa, Cadbury was the villain of one of Chesterton's poems, ***The Song of Right and Wrong***:

***Tea, although an Oriental,
Is a gentleman at least;
Cocoa is a cad and coward,
Cocoa is a vulgar beast.
Cocoa is a crawling, cringing,
Lying, loathsome swine and clown,
And may very well be grateful
To the fool that takes him down.***

After the verses on cocoa, published in 1914, by his own account, Chesterton did not write for the *Daily News* for many years. Although like Lever a model employer renowned for his philanthropy, Cadbury was ***“a cad and coward”*** to Chesterton because like other newspaper proprietors, he was too timid to fight powerful vested interests and real abuses. Chesterton's alienation from the press was confirmed by the prosecution of his brother Cecil for alleging corruption in the Liberal administration over insider share-dealings in what was known as the Marconi scandal. The Marconi scandal was a complicated affair, in which Chesterton was not wholly in the right, but it involved the future Liberal Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, under whom one species of corruption was to achieve heroic proportions, the government's sale of peerages to benefit the Liberal Party.

The sanctimony of the liberal proprietor of the *Daily News* no doubt suggested one part of Chesterton's wonderful portrait in ***The Flying Inn*** of the editor Hibbs, the master of the irrelevant but high-sounding *non sequitur*: Hibbs, a minor antihero in a work devoted to a conspiracy to make England Muslim and teetotal, only becomes human when he gets drunk. Like Chesterton's millionaires, like Mr Mondragon, a vegetarian who symbolically ate men, Hibbs was

a puritan who has no idea of how to enjoy himself, and only takes to the bottle for the worst of reasons, from worry and the wish for oblivion.

Yet Chesterton also had his model of the journalist as hero. His own particular great man was the uncrowned king of British journalists, the militant early nineteenth-century farmer-editor William Cobbett, who in Chesterton's words, was "**the noblest English example of the noble calling of the agitator**", a writer, fighter and biter for whom journalism was properly the mouthpiece of the poor and the journalist was the tribune of the people.

Cobbett was himself heir to a radical tradition, but was also a Tory traditionalist believing in the ancient English virtues. Though a devout if eirenic Protestant and a member of the Church of England, in his *History of the Protestant Reformation*, he took the findings of the very moderate Catholic historian John Lingard and turned them into a flaming sword in the hands of non-Catholic radicals like himself. Thus Cobbett idealised the medieval Catholic past as Merrie England, and the Reformation as the era of the pillage of the Church and of the monasteries and therefore of the patrimony of the poor. In Chesterton's view, Cobbett stood for England: England unindustrialised, self-sufficient, relying on a basis of agriculture and sound commerce. Cobbett had "**denounced the eating up of England by factories and industrial towns**", the destruction of the England of bacon and beer, and cakes and ale, of tumbledown hovels and cottage gardens, the Little England of a pre-imperial English nationalism, an England sufficient in itself and utterly indifferent to that whole ideal of the greater Britain or British Empire which was the religion of the Australia of my childhood.

Chesterton particularly rejoiced in Cobbett's demonstration of the resources of the English language for abusing others, and he mourned the decay of this instrument in his own time, when the people who should be roundly abused so richly abounded. Chesterton was the least practical of men, but he also delighted in Cobbett's exposition in his *Cottage Economy* of the arts of the English countryside, in brewing beer, keeping cows, pigs and poultry, making mustard, plaiting straw for hats and bonnets and growing the Indian maize which Cobbett himself had brought back from America. Cobbett understood the England of Everyman, of the ordinary Englishman, above all of the mass of the population who were still in his day agricultural labourers, who often went hungry, an England the very knowledge of which was now denied by the English press to the English people.

Here, therefore, was a tremendous paradox at the heart of Chesterton's view of England and the English: that popular literature, the press which the people read, had been entirely corrupted by its rich proprietors and by their dependent lackeys in his own profession, while the professors, who might at least have created a true history of England, had written histories from which the English people were absent altogether. Chesterton's distrust of journalism was, however, to be greatly enhanced by his developing Catholicism, with its story of a primordial fall away of the country from true religion and from its boasted medieval claim to be the Virgin Mary's dowry. Chesterton's interpretation of English history was informed by his concomitant social philosophy, based upon Pope Leo XIII's body of teaching on the sanctity of private property, which should be as widely available as possible, especially among the peasantry. The influence of Leo on

Chesterton came with his adoption of Hilaire Belloc's 'distributist' affirmation of the virtues of peasant proprietorship and small-scale businesses and craft unions or guilds as the economic foundation of a properly Catholic social order. Distributism was for Chesterton the Catholic alternative to the unregulated capitalism and the over-regulated communism which between them would lay waste the world. Chesterton was, moreover, a convert to Hilaire Belloc's view of the Servile State, and to Belloc's rejection of the Liberal Party's use of the State, even in a charitable fashion, to make dependent slaves of its citizens, through the State provision of health care and old age pensions.

In this, Chesterton's theology was from the first a liberation theology, but a liberation theology with a difference. Chesterton's lack of belief in the State and his belief in property ownership separated him by a great gulf from the politicians of the conventional British left, with whom he otherwise had so much in common. They wanted a propertyless proletariat to rebel to create a Socialist State; he wanted the poor to rise, but to abolish the State and become propertied.

But the English poor owned nothing, and so Chesterton's vision of English history, as a conspiracy of rich men against poor ones, has a shadow resemblance to vulgar Marxism, and to his belief in the long and successful campaign of the rich to hide the truth from the people. Marxists declared that the party system of Liberal against Conservative in late Victorian and Edwardian England was a sham contest between rival bodies of oligarchs and plutocrats. Chesterton, and his brother Cecil, and Belloc, perfectly agreed with them.

This is, in fact, an exaggeration: there were real issues in British party politics which deeply divided the Liberals and the Tories, as over the reform of the House of Lords and Home Rule for Ireland. But Chesterton's revulsion from modern plutocratic England informs the vision of his *A Short History of England*, in which the central occurrence is not so much even the Reformation, as a series of social and economic events from which the Reformation profited, the destruction of the popular culture of medieval or Merrie England: the dispossession of its yeomen farmers to create sheep walks; the suppression of the incipient democracy of the Peasants' Revolt and of the guilds, which anticipated the modern trade unions; the enclosure of the common lands on which the poor could graze a pig or cow; the transfer of the properties of the monasteries to a new race of squires, and the sacrifice of the poor to the harsh austerities of the Tudor Poor Laws. The Reformation fostered the creation of the squirearchy and then of industrialism, in that interaction of Protestantism with the rise of capitalism expounded by Max Weber and R.H. Tawney.

Some parts of this picture have a long history: Chesterton's anti-industrialism was a large part of Romanticism. England, the oldest of the industrial nations, has the strongest attachment to its rural landscapes, and contains the world's most dedicated flower and vegetable gardeners, and although the nation was the first in history in which a majority of people came to live in the towns, its heart still lies in a thatched cottage in the country. The hostile reaction against the factory system occurred in both ultra-conservatives and ultra-radicals and in such nineteenth-century writers as Robert Southey, Augustus Pugin, John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, the last of whom coined the phrase the 'gloomy science' to describe the kind of political

economy which justified industrialism and the doctrines of liberal laissez-faire. Chesterton's understanding of English history is the sinister one to be found among backward-looking Socialists such as the great artist and designer William Morris, who deplored the replacement of medieval craftsmanship and local materials by mass production, as well as among the high Tory clergy of the Oxford Movement, who wanted a return to the rule of benevolent medieval priests. Above all, this was the vision of Cobbett, a true prophet who foresaw the perishing of the whole English power of self-support, the growth of cities that drain and dry up the countryside, the growth of dense dependent populations incapable of finding their own food, the toppling triumph of machines over men, the sprawling omnipotence of financiers over patriots, the herding of humanity in nomadic masses whose very homes are homeless, the terrible necessity of peace and the terrible probability of war, all the loading up of our little island like a sinking ship; the wealth that may mean famine and the culture that may mean despair ... In short, Cobbett predicted and denounced the modern world as we know it now.

This is an understanding of the past entirely opposed to the dominant tradition of English historiography, the Whig interpretation of English history as a story of progress through Protestantism, the Enlightenment and industrialism to the great cities, riches and liberalism of the present. Indeed Chesterton's view is equally opposed to the countervailing power of Agatha Christie's rival Tory vision of England in the Miss Marple detective stories, said to be the best-selling books in the world after the Bible, which are set in the village of St Mary Mead, with its parson and squire, a traditional rural England to which murder comes as the violation by the murderer of a perfect social and moral order. Against both the Whigs and the Tories, Chesterton saw the history of England not as a progress upward from medieval barbarism to a pleasant present and a better future, or as the conservation of a much-loved tradition, but as a long descent to the pit and the everlasting bonfire.

Like Cobbett before him, and Pugin and Carlyle, Chesterton exaggerated the charity of the medieval monasteries, - poor relief was essentially a parochial responsibility - and he simplified English history into a story of decline and fall. But one strand of his argument has been legitimated by recent scholars like Eamon Duffy, in their picture of the integrity and genuine popularity of late medieval Catholicism, which only the English Crown could destroy. Chesterton thought that the English masses had never become fully Protestant, though here it is possible that he underestimated the place in popular consciousness of a negative No Popery, the anti-Catholic British tradition, with its burnings of effigies of the pope every Fifth of November. To Chesterton, the decay of peasant proprietorship had heralded the advent of the dark satanic mills of the factory system and all its woes, and the worst exploitation by the rich of the poor in history, with their concomitant oppression in the nineteenth-century workhouses of the New Poor Law, which imprisoned the destitute for their destitution. Chesterton's history is as present-minded as Marx's, as an explanation of the evils of the industrial present and of the condition of the urban poor.

But Chesterton's democratic faith, forged by his love of the poetry of Whitman and Browning, and confirmed by Belloc's enthusiasm for the French Revolution, which Belloc and Chesterton wrongly thought had endowed the French peasantry with property, left him with the problem as

to why it was only in a cosmetic sense that England had become a democracy, unlike countries reborn in the fires of real revolutions, like the United States and France and Ireland. The central facts of recent British history were that England had escaped the French Revolution, and that the English poor, in the army of Wellington and the navy of Nelson, had fought like lions against France to keep themselves in chains. Chesterton's poem, ***The Secret People***, is still often quoted, as on the Internet, in support of allegations of conspiracy by cliques and cabals against the public good, and it portrays the poor as essentially passive spectators to the better-known currents of public events, so that where conventional Socialist and radical historians have exaggerated the revolutionary possibilities of the Chartist and Labour movements, Chesterton quickly passes over them, for none of them had been successful.

And yet for all their sufferings, and in spite of their apparent willingness to be dupes, Chesterton insisted that the English poor had not been corrupted. Not of course that he believed in their original virtue: he had too profound a grasp of the doctrine of Original Sin for that. Yet the 'Secret People' retain a mysterious innocence:

***Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget;
For we are the people of England, that never have spoken yet.
There is many a fat farmer that drinks less cheerfully,
There is many a free French peasant who is richer and sadder than we.
There are no folk in the whole world so helpless or so wise.
There is hunger in our bellies, there is laughter in our eyes;
You laugh at us and love us, both mugs and eyes are wet:
Only you do not know us. For we have not spoken yet.***

There is, therefore, an undercurrent of menace in the poem. The people retain at least the possibility of revolutionary action, and their masters, who 'look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies', should fear them:

***It may be we shall rise the last as Frenchmen rose the first,
Our wrath come after Russia's wrath and our wrath be the worst.***

It should perhaps be noted that the wrath of Russia referred to here was not the Bolshevik rising of 1917, for the poem was published before then, in 1915, but the aborted revolution of 1905. This enthusiasm for red revolution should give the lie to the absurd assertion that Chesterton was some sort of fascist. He was an anti-elitist, a populist, a democrat heart and soul, and an occasionally bloody-minded one, as in his regret that Britain had experienced no civil war since the seventeenth century. He was convinced that ***"the meanest man is immortal"***, as made in the divine image. He respected the people even when they became a mob. But why the English should have been so unaffected at their heart by five hundred years of passivity remains unclear, except through a kind of faith, Chesterton's unshakeable faith in the immortality of common men. They bear their servitude with heroic fortitude to oppressors who do not understand them. In a remarkable passage in his ***A Short History of England***, Chesterton suggests that the true secret of the secret people is their sense of humour:

This is the colour and the character that has run through the realities of English history, and it can hardly be put in a book, least of all a historical book. It has its flashes in our fantastic fiction and in the songs of the street, but its true medium is conversation. It has no name but incongruity. An illogical laughter survives everything in the English soul. It survived, perhaps, with only too much patience, the time of terrorism in which the more serious Irish rose in revolt, That time was full of a quite topsy-turvy tyranny, and the English humorist stood on his head to suit it. Indeed, he often receives a quite irrational sentence in a police court by saying he will do it on his head. So, under Pitt's coercionist regime, a man was sent to prison for saying that George IV. was fat; but we feel he must have been partly sustained in prison by the artistic contemplation of how fat he was. That sort of liberty, that sort of humanity, and it is no mean sort, did indeed survive all the drift and downward eddy of an evil economic system, as well as the dragooning of a reactionary epoch and the drearier menace of materialistic social science, as embodied in the new Puritans, who had purified themselves even of religion.

It was humour which kept the heart of the Englishman pure and free. If what he reads now is anything to judge him by, I cannot think that Chesterton's faith in him could still survive.

Yet Chesterton's compulsion to communicate what he saw so clearly is a partial reply to the charge that he produced too much. The demands of journalism for copy can be insatiable, and some of what he wrote was dross. But as has been said, he threw his gold pieces around, and there is gold somewhere in everything he wrote. Perhaps the greatness of a journalist can lie in his indifference to his own output, and his willingness to see it die. Chesterton was a journalist, who was utterly indifferent to the ambition which moves some writers, the hope of literary immortality. Like Cobbett before him, he was more interested in his causes than in himself, and more interested in mankind than in either. In this also he stands in a tradition, a Catholic one. The nineteenth-century Catholic revival produced some great self-sacrificing, lion-like, populist lay journalists: Louis Veuillot in France, Orestes Brownson in the United States, Frederick Lucas in England. A modern Catholic revival needs great journalists as well. But if the Church needs a patron of journalism, to stand above her altars, then the greatest of these is Chesterton.