The Man Who Was G. K. C.

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Halperin makes his basic point, and *Novelists in Their Youth* is certainly a pleasant and sometimes informative read. But, at least from this writer's point of view, it is not more than that.

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**THE MAN WHO WAS G. K. C.**


If you are looking for a quick read of some 280 pages (with large print) and general information on the life of the prolific writer G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) who reflected—even if he did not always reflect deeply—on the events of his era; or, if you are seeking an apologia for the Catholicism of Chesterton who, Michael Coren tries to convince us, was not really the anti-Semitic person that general opinion and some poetry and prose written by Chesterton himself might suggest to the contrary; then *Gilbert: The Man Who Was G. K. Chesterton* is for you.

If, however, your interest is in the scholarly precision of research, careful documentation, and the dispassionate criticism of a literary scholar, of sources that go significantly beyond Chesterton's autobiography and some letters and reminiscences of friends, then this book is not for you. If you become aggravated by too much quotation from one source—on occasion I wondered why Coren did not simply edit Chesterton's autobiography—or become aggravated when a biographer quotes some eighty-eight lines of prosaic poetry introductory to the volume, and substitutes it for critical commentary, then you might want to look elsewhere for a study of Chesterton.

Or, if you want to record for the future the promise of a good journalist who, having written his first biography, is rapidly pursuing the writing of a second one—on H. G. Wells—then read and enjoy, because *Gilbert* is a good, if sometimes jejune (Coren's own word to describe his effort), general introduction for the non-specialist. Coren does not write as if he cares about the classical debate over whether a work should aspire either for the scholar's bookshelf or the coffee table of the general reader: he has clearly chosen the general reader. In fact, Coren adapts Chesterton's own less than scholarly biographical style, commenting: "The absence of notes in the book is a deliberate policy. In my jejune way
I have attempted to follow in the tradition of my subject, and paint a picture as well as tell a story of a great life.”

G. K. Chesterton, a prolific writer almost as well-known in his day for his Falstaffian girth and drinking as for his writing, is almost forgotten today, even by those who watch the Father Dowling mysteries currently on prime time television in the United States and vaguely remember that Chesterton wrote a series of detective stories about the Catholic Father Brown—which were based on Chesterton’s good friend, Father John O’Connor. Coren lists in an appendix some eighty-five published Chesterton volumes, even though many are not discussed in the text. Most of the titles are now out of print, but the Ignatius Press is currently proceeding, however slowly, to re-issue them. In addition to novels, more than a dozen book-length biographies (beginning with Robert Browning in the English Men of Letters series), and various works commenting on English life, Chesterton wrote approximately 1600 essays over thirty years for the “Our Notebook” column of the Illustrated London News; and he served in various reviewing and editorial capacities, perhaps the most notable of which were his formative experience with the publisher T. Fisher Unwin and his later editorship of G. K.’s Weekly. The twenty-seven photographs included enhance the reader’s visual appreciation of Chesterton and some of his contemporaries.

Chesterton as a biographer was notable in his day for creating vivacious and readable studies that more academic biographers might have questioned. An early biography, on Robert Browning (1903), was more readable than meticulously precise; and Chesterton candidly admitted that he did not understand the various works of William Blake, the subject of another biography. But such things did not deter Chesterton from writing anyway. Coren comments tellingly on Chesterton’s method in creating the Browning biography: “His note taking was flimsy and volatile, of a sporadic nature and relied entirely on what particular theme of Browning appealed to him on any particular day. There was no realistic pattern of work, no idea as to how the chapters would connect or combine. With carelessness and a touch of arrogance, he steadfastly refused to check his remembered quotations from Browning, and this resulted in a highly inaccurate manuscript.” In such instances, one can accept Coren’s judgment that Chesterton was not a “natural biographer,” despite the fact that he wrote more than a dozen, ranging from St. Francis of Assisi to Charles Dickens.
Coren does not try to convince his readers, by using modern methods of literary analysis of the novels, that Chesterton really has a lot to tell readers at the end of the twentieth century; and there are lacunae. Coren typically summarizes the major novels cursorily, and follows with commentary that one might expect of a 1950s preface to a text edited for high school use. A case in point is the discussion of The Napoleon of Notting Hill: “Conflict dominates Notting Hill, as it would do most of Gilbert’s novels; between religion and atheism, modern and traditional, native and alien, light and dark. The struggle, and blurring of the serious and the humorous arise again and again, never as strongly as the men of Notting Hill fighting and dying for what their absurd king had begun simply as a glorified joke.” A few more lines like this and a paragraph quoted from the novel constitute the critical commentary.

While some might argue that Coren underdoes the critical commentary, others might believe that he overdoes attention to the minutiae of Chesterton’s Catholicism. The first chapter, devoted to Gilbert’s death, contains, among other exordiums, the following: “On June 12th [1936] Monsignor Smith ... arrived ... to anoint Gilbert with Chrism and to give communion. ... Father Vincent McNabb followed soon afterwards. He sang the Salve Regina over Gilbert, the hymn which is sung over dying Dominican priests; how appropriate for the biographer of St. Thomas Aquinas, the jewel of the Dominican order. He saw Gilbert’s pen lying by the side of the bed, blessed and kissed it and then returned to London.”

The study is uneven. Coren’s digression on the merits of Walt Whitman is embarrassing; and occasionally his comments, such as the one discussing general reasons for committing suicide, would have been better left unsaid. Coren admits to expanding the text to suit the American editors of a book that was published in somewhat different form by the British publisher Jonathan Cape in 1989. Take for example the chapter “Best of Enemies, Best of Friends,” which details the well-known and stormy relationship between Shaw and Chesterton. It is by far the liveliest chapter in the book, and concludes with a seven page discussion of the famous debate in Kingsway Hall in 1927, moderated by that other early twentieth century Catholic man of letters Hilaire Belloc. This confrontation culminated other debates—notably a performance at the Heretics Club in Cambridge in 1911, overheard and recorded luncheon discussions, lively letters, and other contacts that followed their
first meeting in Paris in 1901. In addition, Chesterton published a biographical study of Shaw (1909) that Shaw had tried unsuccessfully to discourage, arguing that the two should spend the time collaborating on a dramatic production, but probably he was more concerned about what Chesterton might write. It is not necessarily a negative critical commentary on either Coren or Chesterton to note that the liveliest writing in *Gilbert* is a playful letter that Shaw penned to Chesterton.

The second most intriguing chapter, "Marconi and the Jews," attempts to rationalize Chesterton's anti-Semitic statements. They were, Coren argues: 1) the inevitable result of Gilbert's attempt to defend his brother Cecil, and 2) a reflection of the typical anti-Semitic sentiment of the era preceding the rise of Hitler. To advocate the point of view further, Coren contends that Chesterton did speak out and write against the "Hitlerite atrocities" of the 1930s; and, yes, Coren continues (but others might be hesitant to say) some of his best friends were Jews. This argument is a good attempt to justify Chesterton's anti-Semitic remarks and will perhaps satisfy those who are inclined to find more to value in Chesterton than most critics agree actually exists. The same might be said of the whole of *Gilbert: The Man Who Was G. K. Chesterton*.

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**CHESTERTON AND LEWIS**


IN SOME WAYS one cannot find two more unlikely figures to compare than Chesterton and Lewis, the great exponent of the paradox and the author of a fantasy cycle for children. Of course it was on the level of apologist for Christianity that the organizers of a “1987 Conference for the Achievement of G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis” saw the greatest similarity between the two. The seventeen essays in this collection were drawn from the papers presented at that conference, sponsored by Seattle University and Seattle Pacific University.

The collection is divided into five sections: "Riddling Remembrances from Those Who Knew Them," "Spelling the Riddle: Literary Assess-