

**G.K. CHESTERTON: A BIOGRAPHY** by Ian Ker, *Oxford University Press*, Oxford, 2011, pp. xxii + 747, £ 35, hbk

Although it has been seventy-five years since G.K. Chesterton's death, many of us still do not know quite what to make of him. Ask yourself: How, in view of his many-sided achievement, would you introduce Chesterton to a friend who had never heard of him (assuming, that is, you have such unfortunate friends)? Would you describe G.K.C as (a) a prolific, swordstick-flourishing journalist perfectly at home in the drink-sodden, deadline-driven world of *fin-de-siècle* Fleet Street; (b) a popular apologist for Christianity, whose *Orthodoxy* (1908) and *The Everlasting Man* (1925) paved the way for the likes of C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, and Malcolm Muggeridge; (c) a poet who penned some superb nonsense verse in the style of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll; (d) a social philosopher who mercilessly mocked the fads of modernity, meditated on the meaning of England, and propagated the economic doctrine of Distributism; (e) the author of *The Man who Was Thursday* (1908), a surreal and nightmarish romp of a novel whose atmosphere has been described as Kafkaesque *avant la lettre*; (f) a perceptive literary critic whose book-length treatments of Browning, Dickens, and Victorian literature are full of delightful surprises; (g) the author of four volumes of Father Brown stories, and, though not the equal of Conan Doyle, surely one of the finest writers of detective fiction in the English language; (h) an enthusiastic hagiographer, whose lyrical *St Francis of Assisi* (1923) explodes with poetry, and whose exuberant *St Thomas Aquinas* (1933) earned plaudits from no less an authority on Thomism than Étienne Gilson; (i) a friend and admirer of Father Vincent McNabb OP, and a contributor to *Blackfriars*, an ancestor of the present journal; or, finally, (j) all of the above?

The correct answer, of course, is (j). However, this pat reply immediately gives rise to another, much more difficult question: What, if anything, unifies Chesterton's staggeringly diverse output? What is its thematic core or heart? In my opinion, the greatest merit of Ian Ker's remarkably thorough *G.K. Chesterton: A Biography* is that it answers this question so clearly and convincingly. According to Father Ker, several themes crop up again and again in Chesterton's poems, pamphlets, novels, sketches, speeches, tales, and tracts. Here is how I would summarize five of them:

1. **The Necessity of Philosophy:** Philosophy is as indispensable as food, as ubiquitous as air, as inescapable as death, and as practical as a hammer. For each of us has a life to live, and how we live it depends in large part on the content of our philosophical creed – depends, that is to say, on what we think about our universe as a whole.
2. **Wonder and Enchantment:** Since everyday things are full of goodness and romance, commonplace experiences are to be celebrated and savoured with gusto. It follows that world-weary cynics, decadent aesthetes, philosophical pessimists, and blasé pundits are all wrong: disenchantment with life is a symptom of blindness, not a sign of superior insight or wisdom. Only vigilant wonder, untainted by complacency, can do justice to the richness and range of existence.
3. **The Common Man and Democracy:** Our neighbour, too, should be an object of our wonder and awe; and this reverence for humanity sustains liberal democracy, which is inconceivable apart from a basic faith in the powers and possibilities of 'the common man' (or woman). The moral? Freedom and fairness cannot flourish unless common sense trumps ideology.
4. **Humility and Humour:** Humility is a necessary condition of wonder; self-forgetfulness, the *sine qua non* of joy. We cannot see the goodness inherent

in people and things, we are reminded, as long as we are proud or contemptuous, haughty or self-absorbed. The good news is that this egocentric blindness can be cured by boisterous and self-effacing laughter, which enlarges our perceptions by restoring our sense of proportion.

5. Gratitude and Limitation: If humility is the only soil in which wonder can grow, then gratitude is wonder's fruit and limitation is wonder's flower. Put more prosaically, this theme may be represented as the conjunction of two thoughts: first, that all good things should be received as gifts; second, that our enjoyment of such gifts is perfected only when made subject to restrictions and prohibitions.

In addition to shedding some much-needed light on Chesterton's philosophical outlook, Ker's biography provides readers with an extremely detailed account of its subject's life. Due attention is paid to Chesterton's family background and upbringing, the trajectory of his career in journalism, his marriage to Frances Blogg, his relationships with friends and associates (especially Hilaire Belloc, H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Maurice Baring, Father Ronald Knox, and Father John O'Connor, the real-life inspiration for Father Brown), his relationship with his younger brother Cecil (who converted to Catholicism roughly a decade before Chesterton did), his opinions on the leading political and social questions of the day, the evolution of his religious convictions, his conversion to Catholicism in 1922, his travels and lecture tours, and his final years. All of Chesterton's major works, and many of his minor ones, are analyzed with care and sympathy – perhaps a trifle too much sympathy, in fact. After all, not everything written by 'the prince of paradox' was pure gold, and a few of his countless socio-political pronouncements now seem facile or wrong-headed.

On the whole, however, I am struck by the fundamental soundness of Ker's account of Chesterton's many virtues as a man and of his excellences as an author. Although I am still not fully convinced by one of the book's major contentions – viz., that Chesterton was Cardinal Newman's intellectual successor – I am confident that most fair-minded readers of *G.K. Chesterton: A Biography* will conclude that its subject is a writer ripe for rediscovery, and that his best works deserve a sober second look from scholars. For this reason, Ker's scrupulously documented biography should definitely be judged a success.

DOUGLAS McDERMID

**THE CELLULOID MADONNA: FROM SCRIPTURE TO SCREEN** by Catherine O'Brien, *Wallflower Press*, London and New York, 2011, pp. ix + 192, £17.50, pbk

Catherine O'Brien is senior lecturer in film studies and French at Kingston University in the United Kingdom. She has published widely on the intersections between Marian theology and secular culture.

*The Celluloid Madonna* is possibly the first book to analyze the life of Mary – the Mother of Jesus – as portrayed on film. Focusing on the challenge of adapting Scripture to the silver screen, O'Brien discusses mainly those films that are Mary hagiopics – films that focus on the life, or some part of the life, of a religious hero versus representations of the Jungian archetype of the 'Eternal Feminine' or Virgin Mary archetype. She examines the often quite different ways in which Marian episodes have been portrayed in such films as Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary*