

## A Chestertonian Assault

I BEGIN with a confession.

Whenever I receive a new number of *The Chesterton Review*, I groan inwardly and, from time to time, outwardly. Let me hasten to add that said groan is not a sign of tedium or disappointment—far from it. But opening those pages means that once again, despite myself, I will be drawn into the world of Chesterton and his friends, and their effervescent ideas. While normal, user-friendly magazines respect our busy schedules, and offer us just a scant few minutes of reading experience, the *Review* is going to hold me rapt for days.

And then there is the added burden of having to return to that issue in later weeks, to explore once more a singularly evocative point, to confront an acute truth, to mull over a telling argument. Other people don't inflict this on us, so why does the *Review*? It's just not fair. I don't have that much time to spare.

If I had to single out one chief perpetrator to blame for these offenses, it would be Fr. Ian Boyd. There were plenty of other models he could have followed when founding the journal. There is no shortage of magazines devoted to particular authors, whose cult-like fans subsist on an endless diet of trivial and unnecessary details of no conceivable interest to anyone outside the initiated fraternity. But no, Father Boyd had to make *The Chesterton Review* into something utterly different, a marketplace for strictly contemporary ideas and debates, with a stellar range of good writers. He had to make it informative and enjoyable.

Worse—and I know that here I am moving into scurrilous territory—he created a publication that offers a genuine education in the humanities, with something on offer for both the beginner and the already learned. Does he not realize the amount of mental activity involved in

these pursuits?

In presenting this indictment, I cite as Exhibit A the 2013 double number, which among other things marks Father Boyd's Golden Jubilee in the priesthood. The offensive against the reader begins early on, with some extracts from Chesterton's own works. Presenting anything startling in such a context should be impossible, as the readership, by definition, is pretty familiar with the master's works. But there we have it—poems that still resonate today. Why does this all have to be so troublingly contemporary?

The assault continues. Many years ago, I read *The Ball and the Cross*, which still besieges my dreams. What I do not need, therefore, is another reminder of the wonders of that rich and vastly undercelebrated book, yet here we have an eloquent introduction, from Paul Jennings. Dermot Quinn continues to show how a superb intellectual historian can write, with a beautiful comparison between Newman and Chesterton. Sheridan Gilley describes Chesterton's role in the journalism of his day, at the *Daily News*. Gregory Dowling describes the parallels between the detective writings of Chesterton and Conan Doyle, in an essay that enlightens our understanding of both legendary authors. Robert Wild introduces me to the work of Catherine de Hueck Doherty, of whom I previously knew little, but must now discover more. Duncan Reyburn expands my vocabulary with a remarkable essay on "Moral Photography." And finally, among the main articles, Rafael Hurtado writes a provocative meditation on concepts of home, domesticity, and housework.

All the authors follow Chesterton himself in eschewing the grating jargon of academe. Instead, each returns to the wise principles of Thomas Cranmer: everything "in such a language and order as is most easy and plain for the understanding both of the readers and hearers." What a revolutionary idea.

Now I come to my principal grievance.

That range of essays would grace any magazine. When, though, you have finished savoring them, then the real challenge begins, namely a miscellany of reviews, news, and comments pieces that, in this particular exemplar, runs to some 200 pages. The reader can dip in anywhere in this miscellany and find something intriguing and rewarding. One piece leads to another, and to another, and thus your days run by, as you are compelled both to read and to think.

So yes, once again, I learned. I learned about the Anglo-American literary scene of the 19th and early 20th centuries, but I also learned about the nature of religious conversion and sanctity, about the preservation and destruction of Chinese culture, about Arthurian mythology and pro-life activism. I read about Dorothy Day and Flannery O'Connor, Geoffrey Ashe and Benedict XVI, Wendell Berry and Simon Leys, Cardinal Newman and Conrad Noel.

Worse than merely giving me illumination and instruction, just that one number of the *Review* has started me off on multiple paths of inquiry that could occupy me for years to come. The editors have neither shame nor remorse.

Thankfully, then, *The Chesterton Review* is unique: Who could cope with so much inspiration?

Although the *Review* has not asked me to perform this service, I will make a suggestion for a motto that it might adopt, and one that pays due homage to Father Boyd's Scottish roots. The Scots have a boast, I mean a toast, which in its original form declares, "Here's tae us; wha's like us? Gey few, and they're a' deid." (Roughly, "Here's to us! Who's like us? Very few, and they're all dead.")

There really is nothing like *The Chesterton Review*, and if there ever was, it existed in a bygone Golden Age of journals and magazines. They, however, are all dead. The *Review* abides.

Excuse me; I have a lot of reading to catch up on.

—Philip Jenkins