

THE MAKING OF A BRITISH FASCIST - THE CASE OF A.K. CHESTERTON

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Submitted for the degree of

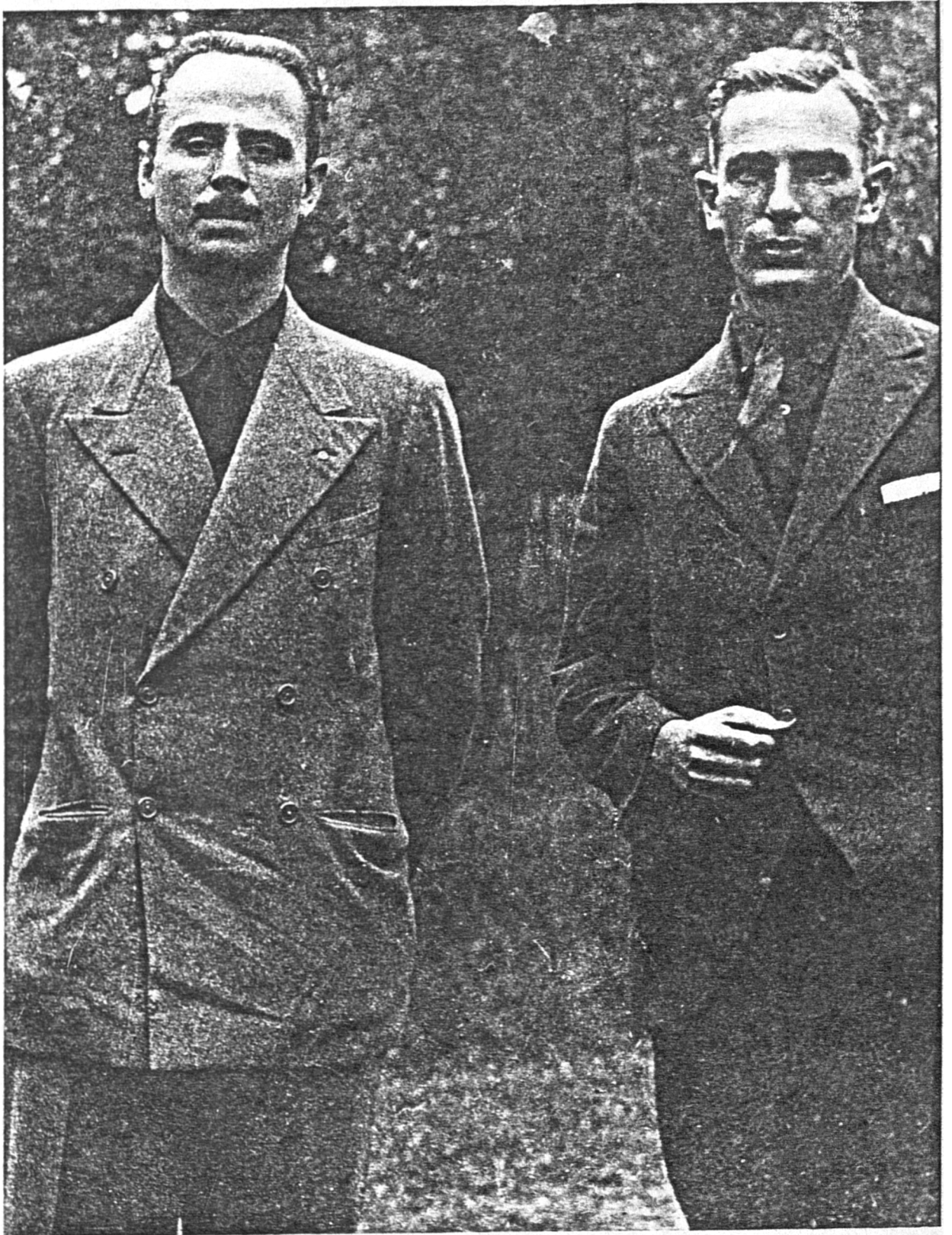
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

at

THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

The Department of Political Theory  
and Institutions

April 1982



Sir Oswald Mosley and A.K. Chesterton together  
in 1937.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, and foremost, I would like to thank Mrs Doris Chesterton for all her help. Not only has she put me in touch with many people who were able to help with the project (each of which she assured of my serious intent beforehand) but she gave me access to all the remaining documents in her possession, allowed me to interview her on several occasions, sent me countless letters containing extra information and even read through the rough-draft of each chapter with approval, in spite of my sometimes severe condemnation of her husband's ideas and actions.

Very special thanks must also be given to Rosine de Bounevialle and Aidan Mackey who also made great efforts to help me in my task. Both gave generously of their time and allowed me to view the Chesterton papers in their possession.

Next I would like to thank a very special group of friends who read parts of the manuscript (in the case of Bob Jones all of it) made most useful comments and constantly encouraged me with their support for my ideas and the project. They are:

Dr. Andrew Gamble, Stephen George, Carol Hunter, Derek Hunter, Robert Jones, Neil Lyndon.

There are also those who gave me more general help with the project:

David Ashton; Kevin Bleach; the staff of the British Library (especially the newspaper branch in Colindale); Hillary Cotter; Colin Cross; the Warden and fellows of St. Antony's College, Oxford (especially Professor Kenneth Kirkwood and Dr John Stone); the staff of the Sheffield University Library; the keeper of the Parkes Collection at the University Library, Southampton; the staff of the Wiener Library, London; Professor G.R. Wilson Knight.

I am grateful to Colin Holmes and Richard Thurlow of the Department of Economic and Social History at the University of Sheffield, for giving me a sound grounding in the subject as an undergraduate in their department. Their wisdom and knowledge of the subject imparted to me the enthusiasm necessary for completing a project such as this.

Special thanks must also go to my supervisors Dr. Noah Lucas, and Patrick Seyd whose professional expertise in wielding the carrot and the stick ensured that I would meet the various deadlines of the project with material suitable for the purpose.

Finally my wife, Anne Baker, to whom I dedicate this thesis: she has sustained me and believed in my abilities for nine years of further and higher education. When we met I had no qualifications what-so-ever. That the situation has changed so radically is largely due to her cheerful confidence in me.

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The thesis is based upon a belief that it is possible to obtain a clearer understanding of the causes, consequences and complexities of British Fascism through studying the process of politicization, from childhood to full Fascist political consciousness, of Mosley's Director of Publicity and Propaganda in the British Union of Fascists - Arthur Kenneth Chesterton, M.C. (1899-1973).

In order to trace through the exact nature of Chesterton's road to Fascism, those events and ideas which can be seen as crucial to his ideological evolution are highlighted. These include his childhood, spent amidst the jingoistic patriotism, overt racism and covert anti-Semitism of fin de siecle South Africa; his cloistered private education in England (1911-1914); his dreadful and yet uplifting experiences of war, while still intellectually and emotionally a child; the bleak disillusionment of peace - his return to South Africa in 1919, where he was faced with the realities of Afrikaner nationalism and white trade unionism, in opposition to Chesterton's beloved British Empire, which drew Chesterton into armed conflict under most unhappy circumstances; his return to England in 1924 and immersion in the small-minded world of provincial journalism; his development of a romantic literary intellectualism which led him to the transfer of essentially metaphysical values into the realm of political analysis; and finally the impact of Fascist ideology itself, with its extreme xenophobia, cultural nationalism, mystical historicism and rabid anti-Semitism.

The result is a portrait of Chesterton which explains his motivation in terms of a complex mix of personal, intellectual, and contextual forces, and thus demythologises the man, removing the easy-to-manage hate figure and replacing him with a complicated figure of tragic contradictions. A comparison of Chesterton's Fascist beliefs with those of Mosley and William Joyce reveals that each was motivated by different obsessions, suggesting that inter-war Fascism was a coalition of many strands of opinion, held loosely together by certain common assumptions.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE MAKING OF A BRITISH FASCIST - THE CASE OF A.K. CHESTERTON

"Centuries of the future, here is my century, solitary and deformed - the accused...Happy centuries, you who do not know our hatreds, how could you understand the atrocious power of our fatal loves? Love. Hatred. One and one.... Acquit us!"

Jean-Paul Sartre:The Condemned of Altona, 177-178.

## INTRODUCTION.

Benedetto Croce, the great Italian historian, when approached with an invitation to write the history of Italian Fascism, wrote in his diary in February 1946: "I have not written it, nor shall I write it, because I hate Fascism so much that I forbid myself even to attempt to think about its history"<sup>1</sup>. It is easy to sympathize with this point of view, written as it was in the immediate aftermath of the accumulated experiences of war and genocide. At that time explanations, however unfavourable to Fascism, seemed to confer respectability upon its doctrines and actions. Such attitudes helped to hold back the study of the era of 'classical' Fascism for many years. As did the Cold War atmosphere of the post-war period. On the one hand many Marxist scholars continued to view Fascism as the political expression of collapsing monopoly capitalism and therefore as simply the most brutal form of bourgeois liberal class dictatorship. At the same time bourgeois liberal scholars concluded that Fascism and Nazism represent variants on a totalitarian theme which encompasses Marxism itself. So often put forward in an atmosphere of strident partisanship, such theories could only narrow the sphere of debate surrounding the subject. At least one damaging result of this rather sterile debate was the growth of a consensus that Fascism was an empty shell containing nothing but excuses for a debased Realpolitik. It was either a mask for monopoly capitalists, or totalitarians (depending on one's point of view) to hide behind and exercise brutal control over the masses. A.J.P Taylor sums up this attitude when he writes that: "Everything about Fascism was a fraud...Fascist rule was corrupt, incompetent, empty"<sup>2</sup>.

Fortunately such attitudes to the study of Fascism could not, and did not last. During the early 1960s social scientists and historians of all persuasions began to process the documentation. Histories of national Fascisms were compiled and comparative studies quickly followed. Finally new and much more sophisticated theories were developed to explain the Fascist phenomenon. If agreement did not come from such diversity, at least knowledge did. For it is no longer possible to stand up at an international symposium on the subject and assert that everything about Fascism was a fraud, without instigating a fierce debate.

In Britain the process began in earnest with the publication of Colin Cross's book The Fascists in Britain,<sup>3</sup> in which Cross discussed the growth and development of inter-war Fascism with special reference of Mosley's British Union of Fascists (B.U.F.). Today there are a large number of historical and theoretical studies of British Fascism available for the student of the subject to consult. Many techniques of research have been employed to understand Fascism in Britain during the 1930s yet, apart from a major biography of Mosley, and two less detailed accounts of the life of William Joyce,<sup>4</sup> no other leading member of the Fascist elite has been the subject of a full biographical study to show how they arrived at such an extreme form of political consciousness. This thesis is intended to make a contribution to this area of the history of British Fascism by analysing the process of politicization of Mosley's Director of Publicity and Propaganda in the B.U.F. - Arthur Kenneth Chesterton M.C..

My interest in Chesterton as a possible candidate for research originally arose from reading an article by Richard C. Thurlow entitled "Ideology of Obsession on the Model of A.K. Chesterton".<sup>5</sup>



In the article Thurlow demonstrates clearly how, taken over his whole career, Chesterton's views provide a typical example of the varieties of racial ideology which have been prevalent in contemporary history in both Britain and Europe and concludes with a most interesting observation:

"Throughout the whole of his career Chesterton's rather peculiar philosophy did not fit readily into the English political tradition. Its weird mixture of racism, ethnocentrism and conspiracy theory in its racial theory and its paternalism, monarchism..., cultural pessimism, Social Darwinism and dialectical mode of argument in its political theory, are more akin to patterns of thought prevalent in pre-Nazi German Conservatism than any English equivalent."

To add to this I also found Professor Skidelsky's suggestion that Chesterton was "the B.U.F.'s best polemicist"<sup>6</sup>. Here (subject to the availability of sufficient material) was a Fascist worth studying in some detail. Further investigation revealed that Chesterton was interesting for many reasons. A second cousin to the author G.K. Chesterton, by the time he joined Mosley he already had a distinguished war record behind him. South African born he had also been engaged in fighting in the so-called "Red Revolt" on the Witwatersrand in 1922. During the 1920s he returned to England and carved out a successful career in provincial journalism, becoming managing editor of a group of newspapers at the early age of 29. A gifted drama critic and astute journalist, he rose rapidly with the B.U.F. and at one time or another was editor of all the major journals of the movement. Mosley's official biographer (the largest single propaganda document published by the B.U.F.) he eventually became the movement's Director of Publicity and Propaganda. But, in 1938, he resigned from the movement in disagreement with Mosley over its direction and methods of administration.

The content of Chesterton's Fascist writings show him to have been a very different man from his leader. Unlike Mosley he was an absolutely sincere anti-Semite who was capable of producing articles filled with abuse against the Jews. His propaganda was also marked by a pronounced metaphysical spirituality and this gave his writings for the Fascist press a moralistic tone. Indeed, so strong was his propaganda that, in the wake of his split with Mosley in 1938, an offer came from Berlin of a job as a propagandist for Nazism. Chesterton, a man who always based his Fascism on extreme nationalism, replied by rebuking the Nazis for even considering that he would consent to become a traitor and promptly joined the Army Officers' Emergency Reserve.

Nevertheless, in spite of his rejection of Nazism as an imperialist and genocidal evil and growing reservations about certain aspects of Fascism, Chesterton retained his anti-Semitism, racial paternalism towards coloured peoples and super-patriotism, into the post war era. In fact his career with the *British fringe* Right continued until his death in 1973, reaching its "high" point with his appointment as the first leader of the National Front (N.F.) in 1967. As such he was the only major figure from the B.U.F. (apart from Mosley) to make any significant impact on post-war racial-nationalist politics.

Having collected a massive amount of private and published material on Chesterton, it soon became apparent that a full biography of this long-lived and prolific writer is well beyond the scope of a Ph.D. thesis.\* Instead, as the title of the thesis suggests, it is the task of this study to show how and why he became a Fascist ideologue and to assess the implications of

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\*It is my intention to publish a full biography later.

that choice for the study of British Fascism.

In more detail this implies attempting to understand the balance of forces involved in motivating Chesterton's move towards Fascism. It is also important to know exactly what kind of Fascism he espoused, why he left Mosley and how his eventual rejection of Fascist politics affected his subsequent career in fringe politics. In the light of such information a brief comparison can be made with the record of Mosley and William Joyce and the conclusions drawn used to critically examine existing theories of British Fascism.

It can, of course, be argued that biographical studies simply obscure the 'true' nature of Fascism, with the ideological self-justifications of the subject allowed to masquerade as ideas and beliefs. Equally, one can suggest that Fascist elites are principally composed of a motley bunch of madmen, social inadequates and cynical opportunists - all devoid of any real inner convictions - and therefore unworthy of study in themselves. Viewed in such terms biography is useful only in the sense that it can reveal the psychological and social inadequacies of the leading activists, proving them

to be truly 'marginal' personalities. Indeed, this has been one of the major contributions of biographical research to the study of Nazism. Equally clear, however, is the fact that all members of Fascist elites cannot be understood with reference to stereotypes based on Adolf Hitler's insanity, the empty demagogic brilliance of Dr. Goebbels, or the frightening petit-bourgeois mediocrity of Himmler. Robert Skidelsky has provided proof that Oswald Mosley's travail to Fascism was not characterised by any marked form of personality impoverishment, small-mindedness,

or political criminality.<sup>7</sup> Nor yet is it sufficient to classify Mosley as a crude opportunist bent on furthering his political career at the expense of his personal integrity. Studies of the French Fascists Robert Brasillach and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, and the Italian proto-Fascist Gabriele D'Annunzio,<sup>8</sup> have underlined both the need to seek a wider frame of theoretical reference in order to understand the motivations of such men, and the fruitful consequences for the overall study of Fascism that can accrue as a result.

Thanks to the efforts of these academic biographers we now know that the link between some leading Fascists and their creed was much more complex than any purely psychological or sociological model would suggest. Also, in establishing wider causal relationships, such studies have helped to further our overall understanding of Fascism, because by comparing and contrasting the motivations and beliefs of individual Fascists, it has become evident that this was a multi-faceted political creed held loosely together in an uneasy coalition by a few shared assumptions.

For too long the understandable tendency to characterise Fascism by highlighting its frightening simplicity and irrationality, and consequent attraction to madmen, charlatans, and misfits, has been allowed to obscure the attraction it held for those whose inspiration was genuine and who otherwise could have continued to function normally and successfully as members of the orthodox ruling elite. The implications of such revisionism are far-reaching, since this would suggest that Fascism was capable of appealing to a broad section of the Right in the inter-war period — idealists as well as cynics, radicals as well as reactionaries, moralists as well as moralizers, revolutionaries as well as counter-

revolutionaries, sane as well as madmen. If this was indeed so, then we must broaden our definition of Fascism to take account of its appeal - under specific historical circumstances - to those who, under different conditions, would have been self-assured members of the intellectual and social elite. As a result it is necessary to take account of both the historical context into which the subject is born and the nature of the ideas themselves. On the latter point Michael Biddis has pointed out that:<sup>9</sup>

"...the history of ideas tolerates on general law suggesting that either influence or conscious sophistication stands directly proportionate to worth. Intellectual blind-alleys can be of the highest significance...prevalent error may be not infrequently more accurately representative of the spirit of an age than ultimately more profitable ideas..."

But what kind of biography emerges from such a perspective? Bernard Crick includes an essay on the problems raised by writing academic biography in the introduction to his own work on the life of George Orwell.<sup>10</sup> This piece will almost certainly be regarded for many years to come as a standard which subsequent attempts at biography should consult. Having done so here it must be reported that this work does not adhere rigidly to Crick's stated maxim that a biographer should refrain from attempting to "get inside" the subject's mind and "know his character", repressing "proud inclinations to 'recreate a life' or to imagine...what someone 'really felt' on some crucial occasion".<sup>11</sup> Of course, there are those biographers (probably the majority) who seem to believe that a person's attitudes and innermost thoughts can be manufactured from the briefest evidence, or who cling tenaciously to the tenets of biographical Freudianism, and Crick is absolutely correct to attack these

methods for reducing biography to attractive fiction.

But does this mean that under all circumstances we should refrain completely from making judgements about character, and do we have to attempt to get "inside" the subject's mind to understand his character? Must we move from "freudography" and semi-fiction to the other extreme of behaviourism and the "critical distance" of a prosecutor? At times there is a hint of 'straw manism' in Crick's argument; ~~As~~, for instance, when he states that: "we must be as much on our guard in biography against the danger of reducing all that happened to character or psychology, as we should that the need to establish context does not produce a crude reduction of events to economic structures".<sup>12</sup> True, but is this sufficient to justify a complete rejection of these tools of social analysis? In Crick's case his use of external observation of Orwell's actions and writings, and the often contradictory statements about him by colleagues and friends has, as Arthur Koestler observed, unavoidably reduced the image of Orwell that he evokes: "from a portrait to a silhouette".<sup>13</sup>

Yet there is much to be said for Crick's approach to studying Orwell, since he was a literary figure of vast creative ability, whose relatively early death has added to the problem of separating the man from his art — distinguishing between the man and the writer. This is plainly recognized by Crick when he states that he has rejected what he terms the "English" tradition of biography for the "French tradition of literary biography" and refers to the dangers of "literary psychoanalysis".<sup>15\*</sup> In short, Crick is attempting to rescue

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\*Emphasis mine, D.L.B.



Orwell's literary reputation from the biographical perspective imposed on it by personal friends and intellectual allies.

Thus he writes that:<sup>16</sup>

"To question the literal truth or straightforwardness of some of his writings is...to notice how his skill as a writer and his person as a public figure may have made some of us willing to accept his partly imagined words as literally true..."

Therefore his biography of Orwell is centred on redefining the relationship between the writer and the man.

Chesterton, however, presents an entirely different problem, for he was certainly not a writer of original creative ability, and therefore his writings do not have a value independent of the man, nor are they greater than the man. If anything exactly the opposite is true of his Fascist propaganda. Such writings were intended to impart his faith to the reader, to convert them, and consequently there is little in the way of subtle distinctions to be drawn between the author and his work.

Secondly, it has to be remembered that Chesterton's reputation, both as a man and a writer, has been subject to the most critical prosecution case imaginable. As a Fascist and anti-Semite he has been vilified from many directions, while his defence has usually come from his fellow Fascists and anti-Semites. Another prosecution case will simply underline the verdict of guilty without being able to understand the reasons behind the guilt. Therefore, rather than adopt Professor Crick's position of the critical externality of the prosecution, it is necessary to follow Professor Skidelsky's example and take up a perspective analogous to that between counsel for the defence and judge.<sup>17</sup>

This means making at least some attempt to understand Chesterton's "character", for without this we shall never come to understand the full story of how this apparently rational

man came to accept the tenets of an irrational system of beliefs. This brings me back to the original question of what sort of biography I have tried to write. Broadly speaking I have attempted to present a portrait of Chesterton which explains his motivations in terms of his personality, intellectual abilities and life experiences, and thus demythologizes the man, removing the easy-to-manage hate figure and replacing him with a complex figure of tragic contradictions. This is not, however, an attempt to excuse Chesterton's choice; a subtler mind would almost certainly have escaped the claims of so simplistic and irrational a creed; rather it is an attempt to understand why he acted so injudiciously and came to accept and hold opinions of such dangerous eccentricity.

It is important at the outset to make explicit some of the methodological foundations upon which this thesis is based. Apart from the basic choice of a biographical framework three main sources stand out as worthy of such preliminary attention. They are - the use of "phenomenology", the concept of "cultural despair", and the adoption of Michael Billig's revisionist social-psychology of prejudice. I will take each in turn in order to preface its relevance to this study.

It is important to begin by stressing that the use of the highly philosophical concept of phenomenology is strictly limited to the study and interpretation of Chesterton's writings. This thesis is not intended as a homage to the work of Ernst Nolte, thereby to erect a theory of Fascism upon a full-blown phenomenological philosophy of history and society.<sup>18</sup> Consequently no attempt will be made here to judge either Chesterton, or British Fascism, with reference to some empirically derived or theoretically elaborated 'ideal type'.<sup>19</sup> Instead, what it does

share with Nolte's methodology is the modest borrowing of the belief that in order to understand any political or social ideology in a concrete situation of political intervention, and especially those which rely on prejudice and unreason, it is necessary to try to understand it on its own terms, as well as by exoteric criteria. In Nolte's own words this means:<sup>20</sup>

"penetration, which does not impose a definition of the phenomenon from the outside but allows the phenomenon to speak for itself in the fullest possible terms and takes its self-image seriously. This method may be called phenomenological...In short, it is possible today, in the case of both Hitler and Mussolini, to present..a comprehensive picture of their ideas and to let them speak for themselves in a way that, due to the fragmentary nature of their utterances, they themselves perhaps never realized".

One of the consequences of using this methodology for studying Chesterton has been the use of more and lengthier quotations from his public and private writings than would otherwise have been the case. This has been necessary in order to allow Chesterton to speak for himself without intruding between the reader and the original, before offering an interpretation of the sentiments so expressed. Occasionally this intrudes somewhat into the narrative and certainly adds to the length of the thesis, but this is a price well worth paying under the circumstances.

Yet even this very limited use of phenomonology is open to criticism. Arguably the fiercest critic of this approach to the study of Fascism is Martin Kitchen who, with some justification, castigates Nolte for being ready to:"Mistake the fulminations of any third-rate ideologue for philosophy"<sup>21</sup>. Fascism, he insists, can never be understood with reference to a phenomonology of ideological formations, but only in terms of its "fundamental objective (social) causes". Continuing in the same vein Kitchen

concludes :<sup>22</sup>

"Indeed it is difficult to establish the existence of any ideology at all with Fascist regimes, for the extraordinary collection of half-baked and cranky ideas certainly did not form a coherent whole...Fascist terror reached its highest point with the destruction of the Jews. It made no attempt to alter human behaviour or build a genuinely new society".

To suggest otherwise is, in Kitchen's terms, to impose a pattern that does not exist in the original thought and thereby award a spurious legitimacy to such beliefs. In this Kitchen goes too far. It is simply too much to suggest that because the roots of an ideology lie in the socio-economic base of society that, ipso facto, an examination of that ideology can tell us nothing about the reasons for its existence and currency in the minds of those who passionately hold it to be truth. Surely there is a dialectical relationship between social and economic relations and ideas, by which ideas become beliefs and react with the contextual circumstances which originally helped to produce them? No ideology is ever entirely divorced from its social and economic means of production, unless it be in the mind of a madman, in which case it is not an "ideology" at all. It is difficult, of course, to establish the existence of any coherent belief system held by Fascists using the externality demanded by Kitchen's methodology. This explains why he accepts uncritically the belief that all Fascists were ultimately seeking to legitimize genocidal tendencies within their personalities.\* This is precisely why a phenomenological perspective needs to be

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\*See below for a discussion of this common belief, xxii-xxiv.

adopted in the study of Fascist ideology. Firstly it allows us to see that many Fascists were ideologists rather than simply cranks and secondly it allows us to trace through the internal logic of these profoundly dangerous beliefs. Nor need one suspend one's critical judgement in adopting this perspective. The insincere and insane routes to such conclusions are just as easily detected by this method. A truly critical phenomenology can take account of both the rational and irrational bases of Fascist ideology, simply because it utilizes an internal and an external perspective on the material.

A second possible criticism of this approach is that in allowing Fascists like Chesterton to speak for themselves, are we not ignoring the propagandist intent of their writings? Professor Colin Cherry has offered a much needed clarification of this problem:<sup>23</sup>

"Propaganda Fides: propagation of the faith. Genuine and effective propaganda needs a faith, a firmly held set of beliefs; it does not consist of casual, wicked statements, conforming to no long-term policy except opportunism, changing with the winds...A good propagandist must be a zealot and not a cynic, just as any good teacher must be in love with his subject. He must have a real and genuine cause. He must be filled with the desire to convert unbelievers whether religious or political...Whatever he is propagandizing he must himself believe in and he must have a genuine desire to convert others to those beliefs, for their own good...If we wish to search out the sin in political propaganda, if and where it exists, it is into the propagandist's beliefs that we should look, so far as we can infer these from our own interpretations of the jargon and language he is using; we should not question the fact that he is doing it at all. We can only then judge what he is saying in the light of what we know of the historical origins of those beliefs and try to understand why he holds them. The words we hear uttered may seem to us to be non-sense, or plain malicious lies, or a distorted half-truth, but the person who speaks them may see a good reason for doing so. The sin (if there be any sin) surely lies not in the ravings of one solitary maniac, but in the whole circumstances that have produced him and led him to think, or forced him to think, and to speak in the way he does and to have the support of his people".

There can be little doubt that Chesterton's propaganda conforms to Cherry's picture. He lacked a genuine cause, but he was completely unaware of this and accordingly acted as a zealot rather than a cynic.

To summarise: the thesis will make use of a phenomenological approach to understanding Chesterton's intellectual development. An all-embracing theory of Fascism will not, however, be developed upon this foundation. Rather an attempt will be made to understand the development of his Fascist ideas on their own terms as well as from a position of critical externality. The hope is that by adopting this method it will be possible for us to notice features that would otherwise go unnoticed and to highlight interrelationships that may lead to a quite different view of Chesterton's Fascist commitment from that which has arisen from partial and external examination of his ideas. I would argue that without this added dimension we will continue to condemn Chesterton for his beliefs and actions, but we shall never come to understand his motivations, or the intellectual, social and historical forces that created and sustained (and eventually partially destroyed) his particular example of the Fascist creed.

The second major theoretical borrowing in the thesis mentioned above was the concept of "cultural despair" and this is important in seeking to understand the nature of Chesterton's pre-Fascist thinking. For, prior to joining the B.U.F. he had already developed a fairly comprehensive intellectual synthesis around a set of distinctly metaphysical values which appeared as a result of his private and later professional preoccupation with



the poetic and dramatic arts. As a result his already growing political and social alienation was conditioned, sanctioned and legitimized by a moral philosophy of life drawn from the rich cultural tradition of British drama and poetry.

The transfer of literary and aesthetic values to the analysis of contemporary political affairs is a subject already dealt with by several scholars. But by far the most important study, as far as this thesis is concerned, is that undertaken by Professor Fritz Stern into the lives, attitudes and beliefs of three nineteenth century German writers, whose writings came to achieve a political influence that far transcended the obscurity of their thought.<sup>24</sup> They were Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck. Lagarde was a leading biblical scholar, Langbehn a gifted, but psychologically disturbed writer, and Moeller a talented literary critic. All three came to political consciousness during the nineteenth century and each was alienated from the spirit of his age, developing in reaction what Stern refers to as a "metaphysical, moralistic and thoroughly unempirical" manner of dealing with contemporary political questions.<sup>25</sup>

The personal alienation of these men began when they were children in the Gymnasium school system. None of them experienced a pleasant childhood, or even a warm relationship with his parents and the pedagogic excellence of the German High Schools turned their initial inwardness into a stubborn opposition to society. In the light of what will emerge below when Chesterton's own experiences of school are reviewed, it is worthwhile quoting at length from Stern on this subject:<sup>26</sup>

"Certainly Lagarde, Langbehn and Moeller had loathed this kind of education. It had widened the gulf between them and society without giving them the training which would have enabled them to define logically or in historical perspective their opposition to modernity. Moreover, they spurned the positive values of the Gymnasium; they rejected the discipline of the mind which the less gifted student accepted as a matter of course, and they forsook the humanistic tradition which left its imprint on the better student...Langbehn's and Moeller's years at school seem also to have reinforced their temperamental disinclination for rigorous thought and study. The customary pedantic instruction which completely starved the imagination confirmed them in their predilection for intuitive and nonsystematic knowledge...In their political and social criticism they were all dilettantes who had not even mastered the art of acquiring knowledge".

When reading this passage it is important to bear in mind that Lagarde became an internationally renowned scholar in his field of Biblical Philology, while Moeller showed an often perceptive understanding of contemporary literature. Even Langbehn received praise from leading scholars for his massive study of the life of Rembrandt. Thus it was largely their attempts to generalize from the idealized world of culture into the realm of political discourse that exposed so clearly the shortcomings of their education, displaying a profound weakness in their wider understanding of human nature and society in general.

With regard to the nature of their attacks on German society, these centred on a revolt against modernity itself and it was this that separated them from the orthodox ruling elite in Germany. Rather than pay lip-service to the past while seeking to preserve the status quo, they were true radicals measuring the present unfavourably with the past: a past which they conjured up from the lives and works of the greatest European artists. And, from the vantage point of a mythical past they looked forward eagerly to an imaginary future when such values would be put into political practice, sweeping away the decadence of modern German society in the process.

Among the agents of modernity that they chose to attack were liberalism (the root of all evil in their eyes), the Jews, the values of positivism, empiricism, scepticism, materialism, internationalism, scientific logic, the appeal to 'reason', and the idea of an inevitable progress throughout history. Against these supposedly anti-cultural forces they employed arguments based upon metaphysical moralism which exalted the mystery of artistic creation (including the forces of emotion, intuition and imagination) mystical German nationalism, and the power of human volition to overcome all obstacles which might be placed in its way by mere rational logic.

Writing of Moeller Stern suggests that he:<sup>27</sup>

"intended to be more than a critic of literature, he sought to discover the spirit of his age in its aesthetic creations. Accordingly he wrote a kind of didactic, subjectivist history - a willfully self-created past as a guide to an imaginary future... For Moeller, as for so many of his generation, art was 'the signpost to the path that leads to the ultimate truth'. Art soars higher still, 'We already possess an art... which renders religion superfluous and which embues every truly modern man with the same confidence in the universe... which in other times only faith in God could provide."

It is most unlikely that Chesterton ever read these lines, but if he had he would undoubtedly have agreed entirely; his pre-Fascist writings are shot through with such sentiments.

As for Langbehn, his massive work on Rembrandt had very little to do with the real historical Rembrandt. It was rather a personification of a cultural ideal - the perfect German and incomparable artist is presented in total contrast to modern German culture and society and offered as the only sane model for a German Renaissance. He stands for all the supposedly life-giving qualities - simplicity, spontaneity and intuition - against the decadent "life-negating" values of scientific rationalism and liberalism.

Ultimately these critics of German society were seeking a Fuhrer figure who would embody the spiritual values of the artist and the courage of the warrior and who would lead the German peoples back into their rightful cultural inheritance. Summarising his study Stern suggests that these three men can be seen as representative of a "cultural type" that made its simultaneous appearance all over Western Europe, and he suggests further that it was the "tension" that existed between their ideals, their personalities and their circumstances, that marked these men out with distinctive qualities. He continues:<sup>28</sup>

"The conventional categories of social type have little relevance; for these men were intellectuals faute de mieux, intellectuals whose work was emotional and seldom reflective; they were artists without talents of creative expression, prophets without a god...these men have been a complex instance of the search for salvation by a type of mind that can neither endure nor overcome the conditions of modern life.. The German critics had refused to accept society on any of its traditional terms; they had been hostile to its education and had(rejected)....the dogmas of the avant-garde...They were eclectics as well as terribles simplificateurs...They appropriated something from every intellectual tradition of modern Germany, except one. They constantly warred against the ideas of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution... and hence they were powerfully influenced by men who shared this hostility, to wit, the romantics, the cultural nationalists of the late eighteenth century...They thought of man as a volitional and spiritual being, in need of faith and a community, and they extolled the romantic sense of the tragic and the inexplicable in human fate."

With certain minor reservations (which will become clear later) this picture transposed into the South African and English contexts, fits Chesterton perfectly. Stern argues that the unity of their thought, the similarities of their lives and the common intellectual and psychological roots of their struggle against all forms of modernity, shows the German critics to be representative of a "distinct cultural type, a new version of the alienated intellectual in the modern world".<sup>29</sup> While the leap

they made from cultural criticism to politics is succinctly characterized by Stern as "the politics of cultural despair".

As already suggested Chesterton fits well this "distinct cultural type" posited by Stern and as such his work provides an excellent background for the discussion of Chesterton's pre-Fascist ideology. For Chesterton's romantic literary intellectualism led him to a similar transfer of values from the arts to the human sciences and he too became intellectually alienated from his peers.

Nevertheless, a cautionary note must be sounded at this point. To begin with it must be remembered that by its very nature cultural despair must be culturally specific. In other words the German aesthetics were inspired in their revolt against modernity by their reading (often misreading) of those great artistic figures who had most influenced German Romanticism - Luther, Goethe, Rembrandt, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche; while Chesterton inevitably drew his inspiration from men like Shakespeare, Carlyle (who admittedly was deeply influenced by German culture) Shelley, Swinburne and Shaw. Thus, although both cultures included a tradition of thought which centred on the belief that art contains a special kind of imaginative truth,<sup>30</sup> the actual content of this belief was different in its emphasis. Consequently Chesterton's cultural despair was bound to differ in crucial ways from that of the three Germans.

Perhaps the most striking difference is in the greater depth of despair exhibited in the writings of the Germans. They were true Manicheans, believing that it was possible for the devil and the forces of evil to triumph. For there was much more emphasis on the tragic destiny of human fate in German culture,

with doom and gloom pervading the works of German romanticism. The tradition of cultural pessimism that nurtured Chesterton's despair was less gloomy and more optimistic in its main thrust. Consequently Chesterton's cultural pessimism, although sometimes reaching the depths of despair, was often tinged and sometimes imbued with a utopian optimism.

A second difference between Stern's study and that undertaken here lies in the importance of the concept of cultural despair as a wider political force. Clearly it was much more important in inter-war Germany than in Britain. Much of what the three Germans wrote found a wide echo in the volkish sub-culture of fin de siècle and Weimar Germany and this ensured for them an influence that transcended the obscurity of their beliefs. For, as Stern reminds us, the concept of the Volk was that: "link between art and politics, that mythical repository of character and strength, of which every German conservative dreamed".<sup>31</sup> As a result cultural despair was one of the traditions that both the Junker elite and the National Socialists could draw upon, albeit by almost mutually exclusive borrowings.

No such wider claims can be made in the British context of this study. In Britain there was no major tradition of cultural elitism capable of appealing politically to a wide cross-section of reactionary and conservative opinion (in good part because there was, and never had been, a comparable cultural crisis). Thus, the writers who most influenced Chesterton - Shakespeare, Carlyle, Shelley, Swinburne and Shaw - did not represent any coherent cultural tradition which, through partial borrowings, was capable of wrenching the British cultural elite away from the values of bourgeois liberal humanism and rationalism,



at least not in any significant numbers.

Nonetheless, the fact that Chesterton succumbed to this form of heroic vitalism is evidence that it was at least possible to draw such conclusions in the British cultural context, and that this provided a route to Fascism. But the main use of the concept here is in explaining Chesterton's particular path from cultural despair to Fascism.

The final cautionary point to be made with regard to Stern's thesis concerns his findings on the personality traits of his subjects. The psychological model developed by Stern (which he admits is in some ways a version of Adorno et al's "Authoritarian Personality" model)<sup>32</sup> suggests that the three Germans shared feelings of "isolation, alienation, and self hatred", mixed with an "agonized search for status and prestige while denouncing the source of honour sought".<sup>33</sup> Chesterton does not fit very well into any of these categories, although he did express self-hatred and was undoubtedly alienated from the spirit of his age. As a result we must search elsewhere to find the psychological drive behind his cultural pessimism.

This brings me to the third major theoretical borrowing of this thesis - Michael Billig's revisionist social psychology of prejudice. Having measured Chesterton's personality against the standard authoritarian personality model and found it wanting in his case (see below, Chapter 1) it can be stated at the outset that a psychological explanation does not form a central part of the explanation offered in this thesis for the cause of Chesterton's turn to Fascism.

At first sight this may seem strange to those familiar with Chesterton's Fascist writings and his reputation among scholars of inter-war British Fascism. Indeed, he has often been

depicted by students of British Fascism as a figure to rank with William Joyce as a crazed authoritarian and severely prejudiced individual; a man whose Fascist anti-Semitism betrays an instinctive urge to attack a 'scapegoat' outgroup in order to function as a normal social being in every-day social discourse. (Indeed, this was a preconception with which I began this project). Thus, W.F. Mandle refers to Chesterton as a Fascist who based his beliefs on "neurotic misinterpretations" and Colin Holmes portrays him as a "severely prejudiced" individual prone, when the B.U.F. came under Nazi influence in the mid 30s, 'to espousing "pathological fantasies disguised as ideas".<sup>34\*</sup>

This study, using as it does a vast amount of published and unpublished material for the first time, reveals a much more complex social and intellectual process at work upon Chesterton, and playing a leading role in provoking him into espousing Fascism and anti-Semitism. In Chesterton's case the historical, social and intellectual context would seem to have been more important than personality factors. (Quite apart from which, character and personality are, in part at least, a product of the social and political context.) Therefore, while it is perfectly correct to say that some of the Fascist sentiments expressed by Chesterton were based upon "pathological fantasies", it does not necessarily follow that he came to accept them through the agency of a fixed personality need.

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\*It should be noted, however, that Holmes is well aware of the danger of classifying Chesterton as pathologically motivated to adopt anti-Semitism without reference to his social situation. See, Colin Holmes, Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939, Edward Arnold, London, 1979, pp189-190 and 42, 160, 172-173, 180-183.

This observation brings me back to the usefulness of Michael Billig's revisionist social psychology of prejudice. In a recent study of the National Front,<sup>35</sup> Billig (drawing upon evidence from interviews with N.F. members, and a very detailed study of the Party's official propaganda) concludes that the "authoritarian personality" model is inadequate to explain certain aspects of Fascist prejudice. Specifically it has difficulty coping with certain forms of cultural prejudice (ethnocentrism) and conspiratorial anti-Semitism. This has led Billig to suggest that holders of these forms of prejudice, since they display a wide range of psychological characteristics, may have come to accept such beliefs through social conditioning and processes of normal reasoning; in short, that social conformity (ie., birth into White South African bourgeois society), or a search for causal explanations in a rapidly changing world, can lead a person of largely rational disposition to adopt certain kinds of irrational belief.

This perspective is most helpful in seeking to understand Chesterton's racism and anti-Semitism. For he was born into the British South African elite and later came to espouse a form of anti-Semitism based upon a mixture of cultural and conspiratorial prejudice. Unfortunately it is unlikely that Billig would agree to the application of his methodology to the study of a man like Chesterton. For Billig has always insisted that the Fascist leadership is exclusively composed of open or latent Nazis, dedicated to employing a 'final solution' to solve the 'Jewish problem', and therefore the proper subjects of pathological research.<sup>36</sup> He is in good company here, with scholars like Martin Kitchen and Gisela C. Lebzelter<sup>37</sup> arguing in similar fashion that all leading Fascists are at least

covert genocidal "Manicheans" whose ideas inevitably progress from "ostracism to expulsion to physical destruction".<sup>38</sup>

The fact that Robert Skidelsky has clearly demonstrated that Mosley does not fit into this model of 'total' anti-Semitism is treated as if it were the exception that proves the rule, or is simply incorrect. The fact that the present study would suggest that even Chesterton cannot be subsumed under such a concept will no-doubt prove similarly ineffective in convincing those who hold to this position that it has inherent weaknesses. Nonetheless, as Chesterton fits well into Billig's social psychological model, I have adopted it as a useful explanatory tool in his case. Whether or not it was designed for such a purpose would seem irrelevant under such circumstances.\*

To summarise: the thesis is based upon a belief that it is possible to obtain a clearer understanding of the causes, consequences and complexities of British Fascism through studying the development from childhood sentiment to full Fascist political consciousness, of Mosley's Director of Publicity and Propaganda in the B.U.F. - A.K. Chesterton. In order to trace through the exact nature of Chesterton's particular form of Fascist ideology those ideas and events which can be seen as crucial to his ideological evolution are highlighted. These include his childhood spent amongst the jingoistic patriotism, overt racism and covert anti-Semitism of fin de siecle British South Africa; his cloistered private

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\*For a full discussion of Billig's theories see Chapter 6 below.

education in England; his dreadful and yet uplifting experiences of war while still intellectually and emotionally immature, and the bleak disillusionment of peace; his return to South Africa in 1919, during the peak period of an alliance between resurgent Afrikaner nationalism and white trade unionism, aimed at removing the country from Chesterton's beloved British Empire; his involvement in armed struggle in South Africa; his return to England in 1924 and his immersion in the small-minded world of the British cultural elite of the 1920s and early 30s; and finally the impact of Fascism itself, with its extreme xenophobia, cultural nationalism, mystical historicism and rabid anti-Semitism. Together, in the wake of his collapse of faith in Fascism, these experiences produced a man in whom the 'needle stuck' on a dreary mature ideology which mixed conspiratorial anti-Semitism and racist Empire Loyalism. But although this is the figure who appears in many of the text-books on the post 1945 fringe Right, it is important to realize that it was not how Chesterton started out in life, and that in fact it was the end product of a very long and complex process of intellection evolution during his first forty years.

This political biography, however, goes beyond the detailing of contemporary political events and recording Chesterton's responses to them. For the collection of evidence concerning individual attitudes and the verification of behaviour patterns must be anchored to a theoretical framework which allows generalizations to emerge. Among the theoretical suppositions which underlie this work is the belief that Fascism represented different values to different people within the B.U.F and that

to categorize them all as variations on a Nazi theme is an act of gross theoretical reductionism guaranteed to obscure the true nature of the phenomenon. Associated with this is the conviction that Chesterton can only be fully understood by borrowing from phenomenological analysis. This allows us to take his "self-image" seriously and can overcome the problems placed in the way of understanding by our total lack of sympathy for the majority of his conclusions. To achieve this end it is necessary to look at all aspects of Chesterton's pre-Fascist and Fascist ideas and not simply (as has always been the case in the past) at what he was against. It is simply not enough to end the analysis with his anti-Semitism and anti-Communism. After all a list of enemies to be combatted hardly adds up to a doctrine. Only by seeking to understand what he believed himself to be fighting for - his distinctly metaphysical and mystical view of the 'good society' - can we render his Fascist creed explicable.

Finally this rounded approach is bolstered by the use of Fritz Stern's concept of cultural despair and Michael Billig's revisionist social-psychology. The net result is to produce an evaluation of Chesterton which places him amongst those Fascists who were inspired and motivated by a particularly mystical, romantic and anti-rationalist form of the creed.

Chesterton travelled from cultural despair to a distinctly metaphysical and mystical form of Fascism; a complex journey and one of many possible routes to, and therefore forms of, the Fascist creed. This allows me to complete the analysis with a brief discussion of the implications for the study of Fascism as a generic concept, in the light of the fact that

studies such as this tend to show that Fascism was a coalition of many strands of opinion, even within the same national context.

CHAPTER ONE

A VISION OF EMPIRE IS BORN

England is the land of my aspiration and my race,  
as well as of most of my adult life, but by birth  
I belong to Africa.

A.K. Chesterton: All Aboard For Addis.



Arthur Kenneth Chesterton was born the son of Ethel and Arthur Chesterton on May 1st 1899, at the Luipaards Vlei gold mine at Krugersdorp, a few miles to the west of Johannesburg on the Witwatersrand of South Africa. His father was the mine Secretary and also an expatriate member of the family in London which included in its members Gilbert Keith and Cecil Chesterton, the literary brothers who, in collaboration with Hilaire Belloc, became famous as political propagandists, Catholic fundamentalists and distributionists.<sup>1</sup>

The Chesterton dynasty in London was founded by A.K.'s great-grandfather Arthur (from whom A.K. took his first name, as had his father and grandfather, each being the eldest son of the eldest son)\* It seems that great grandfather Arthur had founded a successful firm of estate agents in London during the 1840s which had flourished.<sup>2</sup> He also contrived to produce a truly Victorian family of six sons and a daughter, of whom Arthur, the eldest, produced two sons - Arthur and Sidney - and three daughters - Alice, Elizabeth and Margaret. It was this son Arthur who married Ethel Chesterton (nee Down, the daughter of a middle class Welsh family of unknown origins) in 1896, from which marriage came one son - the A.K. Chesterton of this study. This meant that A.K. was second cousin to his illustrious relation G.K., his grandfather - Arthur - being an older brother of G.K.'s father Edward.

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\*There is a family legend (faithfully recounted to me by A.K.'s wife, Doris Chesterton) which suggests that the Chestertons were minor gentry in the village of Chesterton in Cambridgeshire and that the family fortune was lost by a member of the family who was both a feckless gambler and a friend of the Prince Regent. He is also supposed to have written letters from various debtors' prisons. None of this can be proved however. See Dudley Barker: G.K. Chesterton: A Biography, Constable, London, 1973, pp18-19.

But A.K.'s birth in the rolling high veld of the Witwatersrand made any thought of contact with his second cousin appear remote. Ethel and Arthur Chesterton had left for South Africa soon after their marriage in 1896. Why they decided to go is unclear. Perhaps the job of mine Secretary was offered to him in England, or they may simply have decided, along with many other British subjects at that time, to seek their fortunes in the gold mining towns around Johannesburg. One document which has survived is a letter written jointly by Arthur and Ethel to his aunt Alice, informing her of their forthcoming marriage and dated May 22nd 1895. In one of the sections written by Ethel she writes that they have decided to get engaged "in spite of the uncertain future, the apparent bewilderment of recent events, (and) the Micawber-like state of A.G.C.'s finances."<sup>3</sup> And this suggests that economic motives certainly pushed them away from England.

This would fit the typical pattern of English emigration during the period. As John Stone points out in his book Colonist or Uitlander? "The motives for migration were largely economic: most Englishmen went to Johannesburg to 'make their pile and clear'.." <sup>4</sup> A contemporary commentator summed up the entire Uitlander group as: <sup>5</sup>

"miners, traders, financiers, engineers, keen, nimble-minded men, all more or less skilled in their respective crafts, all bent on gain, and most of them with that sense of irresponsibility and fondness for temporary pleasure which a changeful and uncertain life, far from home, and relieved from the fear of public opinion, tends to produce."

Whether or not Arthur Chesterton fitted the latter part of this characterisation there is no way of knowing. But that he was indeed

a skilled administrator can be gleaned from the fact that he was the Mine Secretary at Luipaards Vlei. Even in a society which placed a high premium upon the possession of a white skin this was an achievement for a man in his mid twenties and fresh out from England. As such he was placed at the centre of the small world of the local Uitlander elite.\* The South African novelist Nadine Gordimer, interviewed about her memories of the mining town of Springs on the outskirts of Johannesburg, recalled that:<sup>6</sup>

"As with all mining centres, the mine at Springs was the raison d'etre of the town, and the centre of all social activity. For the whites life was wonderfully cared for from cradle to grave: hospitals, doctors, recreation facilities, dramatic societies...The mine manager - usually an Englishman or a Scot - played the role of local squire.

Once a year he had a garden party, and you were just nobody if you were not invited. The mine manager's wife would wear a long chiffon dress and leghorn hat, and everybody bought new clothes."

Such was the economic and social security of colonialism into which A.K. Chesterton was born. His father's success, however, was to be short lived. For this was a time of acute political uncertainty and instability in this portion of the British Empire.

1899, the year of Chesterton's birth, was, for the Boers the climax of what they termed 'a century of wrong'. Ever since their arrival in the Dutch Cape Colony in 1795 the British had pursued a policy of gradual annexation of territory won by the Boers in a series of bloody "Kaffir" wars with local tribes. The forces of the British Crown simply followed behind and moved in to claim sovereignty at a suitable moment, to be followed by the imposition of British law. In 1834 the Governor of the

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\*Uitlander was an Afrikaner name for foreign residents of the Boer republic of the Transvaal.

Eastern Cape Colony, Sir Benjamin D'Urban, began to enforce upon the Boers an edict outlawing slavery from the British Empire. One Boer, summing up the fundamental doctrinal objections to such laws, wrote of:<sup>7</sup>

"the scandalous and unjust procedures in regard to the freeing of our slaves...their being placed on an equality with Christians, contrary to the laws of God and the natural differences of race and religion, so that it was intolerable for any decent Christian to bow under such a burden; wherefore we rather moved away in order to preserve the purity of our doctrines."

She is referring to the 'Great Trek', the most famous acceleration of the 19th century trend in Boer migration away from British control. (Although it was also provoked by overcrowding and consequential land-hunger, and by several preceding years of drought.) This mass migration north prefaced seventy years of South African history succinctly described by one historian as presenting a picture of:<sup>8</sup>

"fluid boundaries, vacillating allegiances and responsibilities, kaleidoscopic flux of populations and shifting race relations - Afrikaner-British, Afrikaner-African, British-African and Africans - all vying with one another".

It was during this period that the Afrikaners perfected their 'commando' and 'laager' system of self defence and attack. The laager paralleled the North American settlers' Waggon Train system of circling when under attack, or stopping for the night. The commando system evolved in response to the need for a flexible force of fighting men to follow the mobile native Africans, and to enable preemptive strikes to be made without the necessity of a large scale engagement. Within the commandos a very open system of command existed, and this helped the Boers in their war with Britain at a later date. Officers were elected and treated as equals by their men. Men of all ranks suggested tactics and,

even during the Boer War, men felt free to disobey orders and to go home on leave if they so desired. Only the rank of General was given by appointment, and the chosen officer would often debate with his subordinates whether to accept or not.<sup>9</sup>

This open social system was not, however, matched by an enlightened civilian philosophy. Constant warfare with the native Africans and endemic conflict with British authority, gave rise to the Afrikaner's 'laager mentality' - a tendency to draw together in a social and mental laager in order to protect their doctrines and way of life. Thus, as they trekked north across the Vaal river they broke with the Cape Dutch Reformed Church and centred their community life on a breakaway church which retained the pre-Enlightenment doctrines of Calvinism in its most extreme form. This Seventeenth Century Dutch protestant tradition was both fundamentalist and egalitarian internally. But in relations with other nationalities and cultures it was dangerously exclusive. The Boer version of the doctrine of 'election' was especially suited to a form of race doctrine and, combined with generations of brutal and often violent relationships with the native African, resulted in the Afrikaner terms mense (people) for themselves and other Whites and skepsels (creatures) for the Blacks.<sup>10</sup> This complex historical legacy reinforced their scriptural fundamentalism and later provided the arguments used to justify South African Apartheid policies.

The depth to which this ideology succeeded in penetrating within the non-Afrikaner White community in South Africa can be seen in I.D. MacCrone's summary of the general white

attitude towards Blacks in mid-twentieth century South Africa:<sup>11</sup>

"Even a superficial analysis reveals it as a very complex attitude which expresses itself as a blend of superiority, dislike, hostility, contempt and fear...Any kind of manual or menial work is 'Kaffir' work, unfit for the individual who has the good fortune to be born with a white skin..a 'dirty' stroke in a game of tennis is called a 'kaffir' stroke, while a decent person who 'plays the game' is a 'white' man even if he is a 'nigger'."

As a member of this society during his childhood, Chesterton was exposed to such attitudes as the social norm and this is an important fact to bear in mind when dealing with his adult attitudes.

For people like his parents the most important event in South African history was the discovery of diamonds around Kimberley in 1867 and gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886. It was also a key event in the Boer's 'century of wrong'. Indeed, the discovery of gold can be seen as the central event in the development of modern South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

The diamond fields alone attracted more Whites by 1871 than had taken part in the entire Great Trek north, and by 1895 some 100,000 Africans supporting around 400,000 dependents had found employment in the diggings. In ten years the area around Kimberley produced £20million worth of diamonds. The nature of the diamond deposits - deep in the sub-strata of the earth's crust and with little in the way of alluvial deposits to lure the small prospector - attracted men like Cecil John Rhodes who brought with them the financial and industrial techniques of large-scale joint-stock Capitalism. By 1890 almost all the mines were controlled by a few powerful companies under the umbrella of the 'de Beers' organization, which dictated the South African output and, consequently, the world price of diamonds.

With large-scale Capitalism already consolidated in the Kimberley region, the discovery of gold on the Rand, in similarly low concentrations, but far larger quantities, led to the amalgamation of the gold mine companies within less than a decade. The Boer Republic of the Transvaal, which was all but bankrupt in 1887, could claim a revenue of £1½ million in 1892 and by 1896 gold formed 96% of its exports. This transformed the Transvaal into the richest region in the whole of Africa. Such wealth at a time of peak European emigration was bound to attract a new kind of person to the country. In the Transvaal they were called Uitlanders (literally foreigners) and denied the rights of citizenship by Kruger the president of the self governing Transvaal Republic. This set the scene for what John Stone has suggested was the first great axis of conflict running through modern South African history - the struggle between Boer and Briton - to explode into open military conflict in the Boer War.<sup>13</sup>

The causes of the war are still the subject of historical debate in terms of the exact weighting which should be given to the different economic, social, cultural and political forces operating at the time. But certain points and issues are clear.

The discovery of diamonds and gold in vast quantities shifted the balance of economic power in the country without resolving the question of final political control. Under the circumstances the British Imperial response was entirely predictable, the region around Kimberley was annexed in 1868, with the Transvaal following in 1877. This new interest in the region was justified by the British in terms of the need to protect the interests of the British Uiltanders against Boer discrimination. But the reality

of the situation lay more in the direction of protecting British interests against the possibility of any significant rival imperialism in Southern Africa and to gain control of the evident flow of wealth coming in to and going out of the region.

This action probably did more than anything else to embitter relations between the two dominant white communities in South Africa.<sup>14</sup> It provoked what the Afrikaners called the 'First War of Independence'. A popular assembly was held at Paarderkraal - subsequently called Krugersdorp (after the leader of the rebellion, Paul Kruger)\* where a resolution for independence was passed and the triumvirate of Kruger, Pretorius and Joubert elected as leaders of the new state. On December 16th 1880 the 'government' took possession of the Landdrost's Office in Heidelberg and hoisted the Republican flag. After months of fighting and a notable victory for the Boer forces at Majuba, Gladstone's Liberal government abandoned the federation policy of the previous Conservative administration and signed the Pretoria Convention in August 1881. This granted the Transvaal: "complete self-government subject to the suzerainty of Her Majesty Queen Victoria".<sup>15</sup> That word 'suzerainty' was left without precise meaning, but the Treaty of London, signed three years later, made no mention of this vague concept.

The next threat to Boer sovereignty within their own republics (the other republic being the Orange Free State)

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\*Significantly Krugersdorp was the very place where Arthur Chesterton was employed and A.K. Chesterton born.



came less from the overweening political ambitions of the British Imperial elite than from dissatisfaction among the the Uitlanders about their lack of political rights. Within ten years of the discovery of gold in its hinterland the hitherto small town of Johannesburg had a population of over 100,000, and by 1888 there were some 60,000 male Uitlanders in the Transvaal Republic, compared with 30,000 male Boers with the right to vote. Mutual distrust was fuelled by the fact that the majority of Uitlanders, if not actually British, at least used English as their common language.<sup>16</sup> The Boers had seen enough of the British in the past. Now they were actually outnumbered by them in their own republic. By 1898, as one writer has pointed out, Johannesburg itself had become dominated by a distinctly British atmosphere:<sup>17</sup>

"under these cosmopolitan layers, Boer and Jewish, black and brown, Johannesburg still felt British - more British than either Cape Town or Natal. In short, it felt like a British colonial city."

This human tide washed over Boer culture and threatened its very existence in the process.

Yet the issue of the franchise was really a cover for the economic ambitions of the Uitlanders. As John Stone points out: "Even Lionel Philips admitted that the majority of (Uitlanders) 'didn't care a fig' for the franchise, and their grievances, according to Bryce, 'did not prevent the Johannesburgers from enjoying life and acquiring wealth'. This is not to deny the reality of their complaints but to emphasize their primary economic orientation".<sup>18</sup> The Boers were aware of this and it made them more determined than ever not to give way on the issue.

In the event the ill advised and abortive 'Jameson Raid'

of December 1895 set the final seal on the path to war. With Boer feelings outraged over Chamberlain's "Committee of No Enquiry"<sup>19</sup> (which absolved Rhodes, the chief conspirator, of guilt) and Britain's Proconsul Sir Alfred Milner, chief negotiator with Kruger over the enfranchisement issue, confrontation was almost inevitable.

Milner was never a typical civil servant. His brilliant mind and penchant for making policy made him especially dangerous in such a situation. He was certainly clear in his understanding of the basic situation:<sup>20</sup>

"two wholly antagonistic systems - a medieval race oligarchy and a modern industrial state, recognizing no difference of status between the various white races - cannot permanently live side by side in what is after all one country. The race oligarchy has got to go and I see no signs of it removing itself".

This was part of a letter written to Chamberlain in February 1898. Shortly afterwards he wrote to Sir Percy Fitzpatrick about his long term objectives for the region:<sup>21</sup>

"The ultimate end is a self governing white community, supported by well treated and justly governed black labour from Cape Town to Zambezi. There must be one flag, the Union Jack, but under it equality of all races [he means white races] and languages. Given equality all round, English must prevail, though I do not think, and do not wish, that Dutch should altogether die out...As for the Boer himself, providing I am once sure of having broken his political predominance, I am for leaving him the greatest amount of freedom. First beaten, then fairly treated, and not too much worried on his own 'plaats' in his own conservative habits, I think he will be peaceful enough".

Needless to say Milner and Kruger could not agree and after various political manoeuvrings war finally broke out on October 11th 1899.

From the outset Britain was placed on the defensive, both militarily and politically. The Boers, taking full advantage of their initial superiority, proceeded to drive the British

back into the Cape, capturing several garrison towns on the way and laying seige to Kimberley and Mafeking. At the same time world opinion was largely pro-Boer. Defeated in conventional warfare and driven from their strongholds, the Boers retreated into the backveld and waged a highly successful guerrilla campaign, causing considerable disruption to a large British army in the field. Kitchener, the British commander in chief, held the Boers in contempt, considering them to be "uncivilized Afrikaner savages with only a thin white veneer"<sup>22</sup>. As such he was quite prepared to use any tactics available to defeat his enemy, resorting to a scorched earth policy of burning their farms and crops, and interning Boer wives and children in concentration camps. Eventually he succeeded in subduing the Boers, but at an enormous cost to British Imperial prestige abroad.

The war had an immediate impact on the life of A.K. Chesterton, born into the very centre of events which led up to the outbreak of hostilities. He was the son of a leading British mine official whose loyalty lay with the Uitlanders and the British Crown and was born at Krugersdorp, the place where the first declaration of independence had been made by republican forces in 1888 - a name central to Boer folklaw. His parents decided to take no risks and to leave South Africa until the trouble had blown over. But they were not alone in this decision. Around Johannesburg a desperate scramble to get away was beginning. Panic was spread amongst the Uitlanders by the anti-Boer press which gave credence to all kind of wild rumours about the hardships and brutalities inflicted on the fleeing Uitlanders.

The great exodus reached its climax during the first week of October 1899, with special trains departing every few hours from Johannesburg and the surrounding towns, bound for ports around the coastline of the whole subcontinent.<sup>24</sup>

Amidst all this confusion and panic Arthur Chesterton saw his wife and baby son safely on to what was claimed to be the last train to leave Johannesburg for the Cape (in fact every train which left for the coast during this hectic week was billed as the last).<sup>25</sup> Mother and son were on their way to England and the safety of Grandfather Arthur's home in Herne Hill London.

In the meantime Arthur Chesterton returned to the mine in order to sort out some affairs before making his own way to London to join his family. It seems that he had originally intended to join one of the volunteer Uitlander regiments, but, according to his son: "he had lost his trigger finger and according to the quaint ideas prevailing at the turn of the century this rendered him unfit for any kind of military service."<sup>26</sup> In the event, his military ambitions thwarted, there was little he could do except follow his family to England.

The journey of Ethel Chesterton and her baby to the Cape was to take over a week to complete. Conditions on the train were atrocious. It was so overcrowded that passengers had to take turns in standing and sitting (which suggests that it could indeed have been one of the last to leave).<sup>27</sup> Ethel, by all accounts a person of somewhat nervous

disposition and accustomed to a rather sheltered existence, was forced to cope with her own starvation and thirst, while nursing a tiny baby on an overcrowded train with inadequate conveniences. It is at least possible that Chesterton's life-long aversion to food originated among the physical and emotional privations of this nightmare journey of October 1899. His wife, Doris Chesterton, remembers that his attitude to food was:<sup>28</sup>

"almost hostile. In particular he disliked handling food, and even preferred to eat sandwiches and biscuits with a spoon and fork! Knowing how to induce Kenneth to be enthusiastic about food puzzled those who cared for him throughout any period of his life."

Given this extraordinary aversion to food, Mrs Chesterton is probably correct when she adds that: "Three wars scarred him physically and emotionally. This was the first".<sup>29</sup>

As an adult Chesterton believed strongly in the volitional nature of mankind, rejecting any Freudian interpretation of childhood. Nonetheless, he showed characteristic autobiographical honesty when reviewing this portion of his early life:<sup>30</sup>

"genuinely factual, I think is the revelation that the eyesight of the infant-in-arms is between four and six inches and that the limitation of his other senses also insures that such impact as the outside world makes upon him is felt, as it were, at second-hand through his mother...As it is I have never been able to discover the 'feel' of life during those momentous months on the Witwatersrand. Apart from unpredictable storms like summer lightning, rather than anything more tempestuous, which perhaps emanated from her half-Welsh ancestry, my mother's disposition was sunnily tranquil and inconsequential and there was little that I recall which affected her deeply. Thus when I asked her in days to come about my first five years, there was nothing she could tell me other than that I had nearly died on the voyage to England".

Chesterton was always reticent when dealing with his mother, with whom, as an adult, he had a fairly poor relationship. He wrote of her "non-reflective type of mind" and spoke of her as a person "whose logical processes I was never clever enough to

understand"<sup>31</sup> There is also more than a hint of exasperation in the following account by him of his mother's social elitism:<sup>32</sup>

"I had no lack of friends among the young girls and boys on on the mine and I played with them in defiance of my mother's decree that they were for the most part 'untouchable'. 'Common' was the word she used. From the earliest age I seem to have been mercifully free from active snobbery".

The picture of Ethel Chesterton which emerges from these brief glimpses of her character is of a rather self-centred individual; a view endorsed by Doris Chesterton. She recalls stories told by Chesterton's aunts (Alice, Elizabeth and Margaret) about the years that Ethel and her son spent in Grandfather Arthur's household after fleeing from South Africa. (The mother-son relationship was important because Arthur Chesterton was to die as a result of the war, leaving his wife and child alone in England). The consensus amongst the aunts was that Ethel was "silly rather than consciously unkind...too smotheringly loving - then unaccountably disapproving - bewildering to such a sensitive child"<sup>33</sup> That such a relationship elicited both love and insecurity in her son can be gleaned from his habit of writing letters to her, in spite of the fact that they were together under the same roof: "He would leave little notes to his mother tucked under a plate, or anywhere she might find them - like 'My dear Sweete I love you'."<sup>34</sup>

Doris only met her mother-in-law once, shortly after her marriage to A.K. in 1933 and during their brief encounter:<sup>35</sup>

"I'm afraid the aunts' opinion of her was confirmed. She seemed a shallow silly woman.. [in a sense]..she hated him she continually ran his achievements down, even his M.C., ...it seemed that only the memory of him as a child struck a chord of warmth and deep love in her".

In his unpublished autobiography (Blame Not My Lute) Chesterton himself remembers that: "My mother who came later not to like me

very much, would always end her reproaches with a reminiscent 'but still you were a sweet little boy'."36

In the final analysis it would seem that Chesterton could never understand his mother and so, with filial regard, gave her the benefit of the doubt. His complete lack of faith in Freudian psychology must have added to his incomprehension. He refused to acknowledge that his mother's silence on the subject of the train journey to the Cape could equally betray the sublimation, conscious or unconscious, of what was for her a highly disturbing episode in her life. He hints at her shallowness and silliness, and mentions her unpredictable temper, and yet dismisses the thought that such people often turn their backs on the ugly side of life and gloss over particularly traumatic incidents. In fact it is highly unlikely that her "sunnily tranquil and inconsequential" disposition was able to carry her unscathed through the anxiety of such a journey, with the death of her husband following shortly after, and her son's distaste for food may well bear witness to this fact.

Of course, it is impossible with such limited evidence and at such a distance in time from the original events, to say with any degree of certainty what the final impact of this mother-son relationship was, but one or two things seem fairly clear. Firstly, it seems almost certain that the journey from Johannesburg to London was a traumatic period for the tiny baby who almost died as a result. (To paraphrase Chesterton's own words, the impact of the journey upon the child was felt at second hand through his traumatised mother). Secondly, it would seem that he did feel somewhat insecure in his childhood relationship with his mother.

With regard to the second of these two conclusions there is a complicating factor. For although for the first five years of his life Chesterton was deprived of a 'father figure', in 1904 he gained a stepfather.

His natural father, having completed his business at the mine, had found himself trapped in Johannesburg, as the Cape railway line had been cut by Boer forces. He therefore made his way to Laurencio Marques the port in Portugese East Africa (now Mozambique). All he could find to travel in was a cattle-waggon and conditions were appalling since these trains were supposed to be for native mine workers fleeing to their home lands.<sup>37</sup> The journey took over a week to complete and en route he suffered the combined privations of starvation and exposure. When he did eventually arrive at his father's house in Herne Hill he was in a wretched state, suffering from T.B., exposure and pneumonia. He died shortly afterwards aged only 27. The Boer War had claimed his life by a very circuitous route (and, as it proved an unnecessary one, since life in Johannesburg went on largely undisturbed by the battles of the war and therefore the mass exodus of Uitlanders was largely pointless).<sup>38</sup>

Life at Herne Hill with his three maiden aunts, his uncle Sidney and his wife, and grandparents, left little or no impression upon Chesterton's adult memory and after four years he and his mother returned to Johannesburg. It seems that Arthur Chesterton, once he had become established as mine Secretary at Luipaards Vlei, had invited Ethel's brother, Harold Down, to come out and work as a supervisor. With the cessation of hostilities he was promoted by the owners of the mine to fill Arthur's position as mine Secretary, and he, in turn, invited



Herne Hill.



Chesterton with his grandfather  
1903.



With his mother 1900.



The 'Herne Hill' Chestertons in 1880. Grandfather Arthur and his wife seated at the centre with an unknown relation standing behind them. The three girl children are A.K. Chesterton's aunts (Alice, Elizabeth and Margaret). The boy seated on the floor on the right of the picture is Arthur Chesterton - A.K. Chesterton's father.

Ethel out to keep house for him. Chesterton could remember nothing of the journey outward on a Union Castle boat:"but snapshots I have seen since of scenes on board ship show my mother as gay and laughing, from which I surmise that her sense of bereavement had been lifted from her - a natural and healthy sign in one so young".<sup>39</sup>

The year was 1904 and once again young master Chesterton returned to the centre of the crisis of British Imperialism in Southern Africa, the social and financial continuity seemingly unbroken by the untimely death of his father. From this point on the social and intellectual environment began to impinge on his consciousness.

At the age of five an incident which he later recalled throws into high relief the power of even a tiny child in this racially stratified society. His mother was preparing for a ball, watched by her son with fascination, and a hairdresser was curling her hair with tongs heated on a small spirit burner:<sup>40</sup>

"When my mother and uncle were away that evening I summoned my friend Solomon, our Zulu house-boy who had won my hero worship for killing a black mamba in front of my eyes, took him into my mother's bedroom, sat him at the high stool in front of the mirror on her dressing table, applied the match to the burner, heated the tongs and proceeded to curl his hair - assuredly a work of supererrogation. Solomon was terrified".\*

In another account of this incident he elaborated on the denouement of this fiasco:<sup>41</sup>

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\*The 'house-boy' referred to would be a fully grown Zulu warrior in tribal terms.

"The poor chap was more aware of the enormity of what was being done than I seemed to be...with an exclamation of horror Solomon dived out of the room and fled to the kitchen. The next moment my mother, having left something behind, walked into the house and into her bedroom, where the burner was still gaily aflame.

'What's the meaning of this?' She demanded.

'Nothing mother', I replied, 'I was only curling Solomon's hair'.

The stormy Welsh component of my mother's mind now in command, my mother sought out Solomon, cowering in the kitchen, gave him a devastating harangue, and returned to deal with me".

It should be remembered that it was quite unremarkable in this society for the boy to so genuinely hero worship the Zulu servant and at the same time order him about at will when his parents were not present. It is instructive to note also his mother's reaction, considering Solomon to blame in spite of his obvious subordination to the tiny white child. The impact of such rigid social and racial stratification upon his growing intellect was distinctly undemocratic. Doris Chesterton was well aware of this:<sup>42</sup>

"All his life K. felt that the chores of living were the concern of others. The democratic way of life was foreign to him. Although he fought bravely and with no regard (a quite unnatural indifference) to material security, he nevertheless expected service to come his way the moment he required it. Many secretaries and voluntary helpers can bear witness to this!"

Shortly after mother and son arrived back at Krugersdorp Harold Down was transferred to the secretaryship of Knight's Deep mine on the East Rand. Chesterton later remembered that "it was here that my mind became loaded with memories of turbulent events and here that my abnormally developed sense of adventurousness found outlets to prepare me for a strangely varied and exciting career".<sup>43</sup>

In his autobiography he paints a picture of himself as basically "a solitary little boy", not short of friends, but content to play rather dangerous games around the mine's cyanide works and in the waters of the nearby dam on his own, or perhaps to pass the time with the local Zulu policeman "a very special friend who taught me something of his language".<sup>44</sup> Every afternoon he would stand by the top of the shaft and watch the day shift being hauled out of the depths. One among them:<sup>45</sup>

"who carried himself with an air of authority, would stride from the cage giving me only a cursory nod. The nod conveyed no hint to the close relationship there was to be between us. His name was George Horne, and he was a Scot, a stern man, tall and incredibly good looking. He had been a tea-planter in Assam and had come to South Africa to fight in the Boer War with one of the volunteer horse regiments, and for some reason I never understood, elected not to go back to the open air at his tea-plantation, but to spend his working life in the bowels of the earth, first as a shift boss and then as a mine captain, until he acted on a sharp warning from his doctor and brought a farm in the Sunday River Valley. But it was too late. In 1922 he died of miner's phthisis".

In 1904 George married Ethel Chesterton. So it was that Kenneth Chesterton experienced almost total continuity of social background as a child, in spite of the early death of his natural father. His stepfather was a miner supervisor and, like his father a totally committed member of the Uitlander elite. In addition he too came from a family of high ability and lineage. Many members of the Horne family achieved distinction in the armed forces, or the Indian Civil Service, and, during World War One, George's eldest brother commanded the First Army and later received a barony.<sup>46</sup>

It is pertinent at this point to ask what impact this sudden marriage had upon the boy, hitherto deprived of a father figure.

Doris Chesterton is certain that there were some unfortunate side effects:<sup>47</sup>

"George Horne was I believe an excellent step-father to K. But the shock of him coming between his mother and himself was terrific. There is a photograph of Ethel and George before they went on their honeymoon. They stand on the stoep (sic) in the happy state one would expect in the circumstances. By accident K. comes into the picture too. He is in the background prostrate with grief leaning over the fence of the stoep. He is in the sailor-suit fashionable at that time for small boys...A little careful preparation could have saved a great deal of pain."

We have no way of knowing why the boy was crying and Chesterton himself, remembering nothing of the incident, rejected such an explanation out of hand. But another story remembered by Doris does seem important:<sup>48</sup>

"George frequently worked late in the mines, returning home at midnight, or even later. Since K's father's death and up to her marriage with G.H. Ethel had always slept in the same bed as her son. She had a rooted objection to sleeping alone....she would go to bed at the usual hour and insist that K. (aged 6) should sleep in the double bed with her. This was much to K's delight too! The ritual was that when G.H. came home he would carry K. (usually asleep) to his own room and having gone to sleep cuddling his mum K. would wake up alone in his own bed - the "other man" having usurped his place".

One the other hand George Horne was, Chesterton remembered, "too brusque and taciturn a man for me ever to know him well".<sup>49</sup> and the boy soon learnt to fear "the strength of his arm and the hardness of his hand". Nevertheless Doris recalled that her husband talked of his stepfather with some affection. On the whole she thinks that "A happy relationship seems to have developed between them and a masculine understanding". Evidence of this can be seen from the following extract from Chesterton's autobiography:<sup>50</sup>

"One afternoon, when racing [my bicycle] against a friend on his...we both collided and came a mighty purler in front of the stoep where my stepfather was sitting. I lay crying in the road. He came over to me hauled me to my feet and said: 'When you are knocked down, remember the first thing you do is to get up again': I have always tried to obey this injunction".

His wife is certain that his childhood did leave an unfortunate legacy of emotional insecurity, in spite of such moments of closeness:<sup>51</sup>

"He was emotionally pathetically vulnerable and easily wounded. And when he fell in love he found it all but impossible to believe that his beloved would not desert him. He could be miserably jealous when there was no cause for jealousy...For a man so good looking, with charm and quite remarkable gifts for leadership and with a first rate (if somewhat undisciplined) intellect, he was sensitive to a fault. Usually so genial, he could be very prickly. A chance word could offend him out of all proportion, as if an abscess had been probed. Apparently so sure of himself he could show signs of emotional insecurity which properly belong to a small child. And all his life he hated to be alone...A frequent (and perhaps deserved) admonition from her [Ethel] was 'clumsy'...If one were to say, or even think 'clumsy' to K. at any time of his life [a] deeply hurt expression crossed his face. He loved her but her irrational behaviour exasperated him. Whatever in after life tickled up this deep-rooted exasperation seemed to uncover a putrifying smell. He often said he hated himself. What he really hated was the emotional insecurity implanted in him before he reached the age of reason".

This poses the question of how we are to judge all this in relation to Chesterton's adoption of Fascism, and more especially his racist and anti-Semitic prejudice? This is the proper place to deal with the "authoritarian personality" theory of Fascism, as it is based upon a fundamentally Freudian emphasis on the importance of childhood, especially early childhood, in decisively influencing adult prejudice and consequent political behaviour of Fascists. It is also based on the assumption that Fascists share a broadly similar psychological disposition, a theme which appeared in the works



of Wilhelm Reich, Eric<sup>1</sup> Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse, reaching its apotheosis with the publication of T.W.Adorno et al's massive work The Authoritarian Personality in 1950.<sup>52</sup>

The argument is basically that in the process of developing the responses characteristic of his culture, particularly in the intimate contacts within the family during his earliest years, the individual builds up a basic "ego structure", that is a fundamental attitude towards himself and others which, once established, reacts upon all future objective experiences and strongly colours their subjective meaning to the individual. Under normal circumstances this is not damaging to the person's personality structure, but in the authoritarian individual this process is upset by unbalanced family relationships and they become "ego alien".<sup>53</sup> The individual responds by repressing many of his own impulses and projecting his insecurity on to other individuals or outgroups in the form of prejudice. Thus the presentation of objective facts about the groups he is attacking to the person will not alter his opinions since his prejudice is a necessary part of his personality and therefore not derived from objective experience.

Such an individual will tend to look upon life as capricious and threatening, viewing all human relationships in competitive power terms of domination and submission, and will consequently be unable to handle the admixture of love and hate common in a "normal" personality. And all this is rooted in the childhood of the authoritarian. Thus, for the authors of The Authoritarian Personality:<sup>54</sup>



"a basically hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitive parent-child relationship is apt to carry over into a power-oriented exploitively dependent attitude towards one's sex partner and one's God and may well culminate in a political philosophy and social outlook which has no room for anything but a desperate clinging to what appears to be strong and disdainful rejection of whatever is relegated to the bottom".

The first question to ask is whether Chesterton did experience a "hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitive parent-child relationship"? The answer would seem to be yes and no. His mother was famous for her outbursts of temper and these seemingly uncontrollable rages contrast strongly with her tendency to smother him with emotional love.<sup>55</sup> But the relationship does not seem to have been particularly authoritarian. Also the absence of a father figure until the age of five poses a problem, as it is usually the father who controls such internal power relationships within the family, providing the child with a figure of resentment (because of his power over the mother) and admiration; while his mother would be viewed as weak vis-a-vis his father and therefore an object both of his love and scorn. (Male authoritarians are usually seen as victims of the Oedipus Complex, becoming latent homosexuals). To some extent his stepfather did fulfil this role, But Ethel Chesterton does not appear to have been the kind of woman who would have allowed herself to be dominated by her second husband. All of which may help to explain why Chesterton failed to exhibit as an adult one of the classic symptoms of authoritarianism, namely the tendency to view all human relationships in power terms of domination and submission. He was not an "affectionless character" who

gave of himself emotionally only as a means of increasing his sense of personal power.<sup>56</sup> Indeed he seems to have been remarkably free from Narcissism in all his dealings with others, when one considers the positions of power he held during his long life. Nevertheless, he did display characteristics often associated with an exploitive parent-child relation in which the child is deprived of free flowing and unconditional love. For he had despaired of ever being genuinely loved by other human beings, finding it all but impossible to believe that his wife would not desert him. His tendency towards self-hatred was also most probably linked to this lack of emotional security in childhood. Another feature of the authoritarian personality displayed by Chesterton was a definite tendency to overvalue masculinity and to praise virility, whilst deprecating "feminine" values. But he very much deviates from the authoritarian norm in the fact that he was not a misogynist, treating women as either prostitutes or madonnas, but was able to maintain working relationships with many women during his life.<sup>57</sup>

A final similarity between Chesterton and the norm of authoritarianism lies in his tendency towards a rigid and dogmatic style of thinking. He tended to think in terms of black and white, good and evil, and right and wrong. Therefore he was prone to stereotyped, conventional thinking and a rejection of new ideas and attitudes.

But, quite apart from the reservations expressed above about the fit between Chesterton's personality and this model of authoritarianism, there are many categories of the schema

which are either totally inapplicable, or only marginally relevant, to him. For instance, the following quotation is taken from a textbook of studies of prejudice and discrimination, and it is billed as a generally agreed summary of authoritarianism:<sup>59</sup>

"anti-intellectuality, a pervading sense of pessimism and lack of hope and confidence in the future; feelings of cynicism, distrust, doubt, and suspicion; a diffuse misanthropy and querulousness; a hostile and bitter outlook which verges on destructiveness; a grumbling and discontented evaluation of their current status; a rigid, somewhat dogmatic style of thinking; a lack of poise and self assurance; and an underlying perplexity related to a feeling that something dreadful is about to happen".

By the end of this thesis it should become apparent that the only close similarity between Chesterton and this list lies in his undoubted tendency towards dogmatism. Apart from that the list is almost meaningless in his case. For he was a man who in his marriage to a woman of social democratic views and in his close friendships with non-Fascist individuals (including Jews) displayed the ability to handle the admixture of love and hatred which is seen as such a threat to the rigidly prejudiced individual.<sup>60</sup>

Ultimately, since Chesterton's personality deviates on so many points from that predicted by the psychological models of Fascism, it is necessary to look elsewhere for the reasons which lay behind his adoption of Fascism. Of course in the specific case of his anti-Semitism a firm distinction between personality and attitudinal factors cannot be maintained. But even here factors of socialization and cognitive elements need to be taken into account if we are to fully understand Chesterton.\* He was not an irrational slave to his

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\*This is where Michael Billig's work is important. See Chapter 6.

personal subjectivity,<sup>1</sup> and his route to Fascism was less an "escape from freedom"<sup>61</sup> than a search for meaning in a rapidly changing environment. Ultimately David Spitz seems correct in his assertion that: "Few if any individuals are in all the facets of their being consistently one or the other type.... Nearly every man exhibits a complex of both 'democratic' and 'authoritarian' behaviour traits".<sup>62</sup> Thus we must deal with Chesterton not only as a personality partly fixed in childhood, but also as a social being, acting and reacting with past and present social experiences, and as an intellectual being, filtering his experiences through personal cognition. Besides, even personality is best conceived as a process, rather than a collection of fixed traits. And a process can only be understood by an analysis of the flow of behaviour that comes from the interaction of the individual with the situation he is in.<sup>63</sup> An individual does not exist or behave in a vacuum, but in a physical, social and cultural environment, and, unless the individual is demonstrably insane in some way, these situational forces will tend to encourage or curb the various, often contradictory, psychological potentialities of the person. The last word on this issue goes to Colin Holmes:<sup>64</sup>

"it could well be that the lifelong conspiratorial analyses of Nesta Webster...fulfilled a personality need. But we simply do not have the evidence to comment in detail on such matters and, in any case, we should not lose sight of the importance of the social context which encourages or restricts the expression of ideas".

And it is to that social context that we now return.

The Boer War ended with the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging on May 31st 1902. Having asserted their colonial power the British, under Milner's direction, were anxious to abdicate formal responsibility and allow economic forces and

population changes to redistribute power at the local level to British Uitlanders. Accordingly the Treaty specified the setting up of "responsible Government" in a settled country, with equality for the Dutch language. £3 million was to be given in compensation for Kitchener's scorched earth tactics and a clause was inserted which specified that black Africans were to be denied the franchise until "after self government".<sup>65</sup> Milner had agreed to all these demands and even persuaded Chamberlain to give way on the final issue of the native franchise. Years later, and tragically wise after the event, he confessed to Selborne:<sup>66</sup>

"If I had known...the extravagance of the prejudice on the part of almost all Whites - not the Boer only - against any concession to any coloured man, however civilized, I should never have agreed to so absolute exclusion not only of the raw native, but of the whole coloured population, from any rights of citizenship".

The Boers (and the large scale capitalists) had indeed won the peace. Milner was also to witness his 'grand design' of a British dominated political system in Southern Africa begin to crumble. By 1904 these bright words of one of Milner's juniors (written in 1900) were indeed a fading hope:<sup>67</sup>

"In the Transvaal certainly the Boers will be a rapidly dwindling minority. Johannesburg, Pretoria, Heidelberg, Standerton, Potchefstroom, Krugersdorp, Barberton, Klerksdorp, Pietsburg either are already or will in a year or two be English towns and under an English government."

In the event not only did 'Milnerism' fail to subdue the Boers, it also failed in its aim of getting thousands more families like the Chestertons to come out to South Africa and tip the population balance decisively in favour of the British. Milner had calculated that: "if, in ten years hence, there are three men of British race to two of Dutch, the country will be safe and prosperous, if there are three Dutch

to two British we shall have perpetual difficulty".<sup>68</sup>

All seemed to be going well with the help of British government support for migrants and, in 1903, nearly 27,000 British subjects entered the Transvaal. But, by March 1904 the direction of flow had reversed in the face of the South African post-war economic depression. It was this slump in the economy which, more than anything else, wrecked Milner's plans for a South Africa secure within the British Empire.

At root the problem lay in getting the mines working again, for the exodus of Uitlanders and native workers during the war had closed many of the mines for the duration. It had been a 'white man's war' and, as one contemporary remarked, although there were some 7,000,000 "Kaffirs in the Transvaal...no one reckoned them as possible factors in the contest, any more than sheep or oxen".<sup>69</sup> Now with many of these workers too frightened to return, the mines were running very short of basic labour and Milner cast around desperately for a solution to the problem. In 1903 he was forced to concede to the white trade unions a Mines Works and Machinery Ordinance, which raised an industrial colour bar against black Africans in semi-skilled jobs, and he hoped that this would encourage a greater influx of British immigrants. It failed to relieve the situation however, and, in 1904, with depression widespread the British administration acceded to the mine owners demands to import indentured Chinese labour, in order to 'prime the pump' by getting the mines going again. The first Chinese came over in 1904 and by 1907 34,000 were employed on the Witwatersrand.<sup>70</sup>

In his autobiography Chesterton relates the story of his first experience of the Chinese workers. It seems that he

entertained a large group of them with childish conjuring tricks on the stoep of his uncle's house at Knights Deep. When the performance was over the Chinese presented him with a contrivance made of cane which they demonstrated was a pillow for sleeping on:<sup>71</sup>

"Then there flashed into my head the thought that it was dreadful that my new friends, my most wonderful new friends, had nothing more comfortable than hard wooden pillows upon which to place their heads at night. To think was to act. I rushed into the house, denuded every bed of its downy white pillows and proceeded to hand them over the fence for distribution".

Young Chesterton was, however, soon to experience the bitter side-effects of the decision to import indentured Chinese labour into the country. As one commentator has pointed out: "The decision to import Chinese labour changed the political climate and opened up a period of bitter class and national conflict on the Rand. More than any other factor the 'Chinese question' spurred British working men and Afrikaner nationalists into organized political activity."<sup>72</sup>

Another consequence of the Boer War was the increase in the numbers of 'poor white' Afrikaners. These first generation landless Afrikaners formed four-fifths of the white labour force in the mines by 1922. They were to form the shock troops of both Afrikaner nationalism and white trade unionism in South Africa and the Chinese labour question was to unite them with their fellow English speaking white workers in a call for repatriation. The nationalist political parties also formed in part to combat this issue. At the same time the growing trade unions organized to prevent the dilution of semi-skilled and skilled jobs in favour of cheap African labour.

In this atmosphere of fear, recrimination and suspicion the white workers preferred racial solidarity to class war against the mine owners and the concerted outcry against the Chinese demonstrated clearly the fact that on such racial issues there was no difference in the views of most white South Africans. In the end, after much violence and discrimination had been shown towards the Chinese, the Liberal Government in Britain repatriated the Chinese in deference to this brutal show of white racial solidarity.

At Knights Deep the forced repatriation of the Chinese labourers was immediately preceded by the miners' strike of 1907. Since the introduction of pneumatic drills to replace hand drilling, and the loss of the most skilled (mainly ex-Cornish) miners in the war, there had been a gradual takeover of the operatives' jobs by Africans, with the white miner becoming a supervisor of two drill teams. But in 1907 the manager of Knights Deep mine instructed each miner to supervise three teams. The miners' union accused the owners of diluting skilled labour in preparation for retrenchment of whites and the men at Kleinfontein struck on May 1st. The strike quickly spread until more than 4,000 white miners were involved.<sup>73</sup>

Chesterton had a child's eye view of the proceedings and paints a vivid picture of them:<sup>74</sup>

"One morning a crowd of us, adults as well as children, gathered on the mine football field to watch two white men fighting with their bare fists. They fought until lunch-time, adjourned and returned to punch each other throughout the afternoon. I have no idea what it was all about, but I do know that the fight heralded the first of the big strikes on the Witwatersrand. The strikers marched in procession down the Main Reef Road behind brass bands and with banners fluttering, and to us children it was all pomp and circumstance and high carnival..

over/.....



"Then...the miners began to be more militant...Soon afterwards I awoke one morning to look through my bedroom window and see a most startling, unexpected and magnificent sight - a sight of sheer joy. The veld on the other side of the Main Reef Road was covered with white tents and hundreds of soldiers were to be seen grooming their horses. The Seventeenth Queen's Own Lancers had been ordered up from Pochefstroom to guard the Knights Deep mine".

The small boy proceeded to procure for the soldiers all the magazines and newspapers he could find in the house and was soon firm friends with several of them. Like so many colonial children of his generation the British Army was seen as the friendly guarantor of peace and prosperity by Kenneth Chesterton.

Shortly afterwards he experienced the righteous anger of the Chinese labourers who, after working extremely hard for little return, were suddenly forcefully repatriated:<sup>75</sup>

"The Chinese turned sour....I was too young to understand the probable reason, which was that they were herded monastically in compounds thousands of miles away from their women. Some grim things happened and there were some even grimmer stories, which may or may not have been true. The entire atmosphere between the Europeans and Bantu on the one hand and the Chinese on the other became poisoned.

Night after night we heard the Transvaal mounted police thundering down the Main Reef Road to quell a Chinese riot at the Wit Deep or some other compound. Sunday after Sunday the veld beyond our house was the scene of pitched battles between hundreds of Africans and Chinese, with the mounted police again intervening to disperse the Chinese mobs."

It was in connection with this trouble that he received what he described as the "first real scare" of his life. He was attempting to squirt water at a group of Chinese, a trick borne with fortitude and even enjoyed by the Africans and which usually had a similar effect on these people. But this time one man stood his ground:<sup>76</sup>

"a tall surly fellow at the end who stared malevolently at me as though daring me to spurt water at him. Although I was desperately afraid, some strange compulsion made me do just that. Wiping the water from his eyes the enraged man vaulted the fence. With panic in my heart I dropped the hose rushing into the empty house."

Emerging from the back of the building he eventually ran into the arms of the Zulu policeman with whom he was friendly.

Together they returned to the house, to find the angry

Chinese still attempting to get in:

"On seeing the policeman he ran silently and with incredible speed across the garden, leapt the fence and made off down the Main Reef Road. There was in his panther-like speed and silence something so evil that when, years later, I came to read 'Confessions of an Opium Eater' I was well able to understand De Quincy's horror...It has been my experience in many parts of Africa that in any tense three-cornered racial situation involving Europeans, Africans and Asians, there has been an affinity between Europeans and Africans and a shared hostility towards Asians. The reason why must be sought, if not in psychology, then in body chemistry and perhaps in both".

From this one can suggest that to the racial paternalism of his childhood attitude towards blacks, Chesterton had laid the first strand of his adult attitude towards Asiatic peoples.

One important element in Chesterton's South African childhood remains to be covered - his education. His earliest memories of this were actually linked to the Chinese issue. He was sent to a private school in Germiston:<sup>77</sup>

"This was only about a mile away, but to my seven-year-old legs a dreary daily trudge, made terrifying by the fact that I had to go past a cemetery on the veld where the Chinese, about to be repatriated en masse, were busy dis-interring the bodies of their dead and incinerating them - why I do not know. Although I added to my journey by giving the macabre place as wide a miss as possible, the sight of those strange men, no longer friends, engaged in their gruesome task never failed to fill me with horror."

At this educational establishment in Germiston it would appear that intellectual stimulation was at a low premium. Run by a Mr. Linton Jones it was supposed to teach at one and the same time boys and girls from the ages of six to sixteen! Chesterton describes Jones as a man whose "ambition was civic" and whose "hobby was whisky". It would seem that he managed to add little to the education Chesterton had already received at the mine school.<sup>78</sup>

After a brief period at a school in Bulawayo in Rhodesia<sup>79</sup> (his stepfather had taken over the management of a mine nearby) he returned with his parents to live on various mines near Johannesburg and attended Johannesburg College (later renamed King Edward's School) which proved equally unsuccessful in enlightening him. Pondering on this in his autobiography Chesterton remarked that:<sup>80</sup>

"By this time I had been, scholastically speaking, so beggared about that I had developed a complete disbelief in education, which I regarded as a ritual totally irrelevant to my life - an attitude which neither the cane of Desmond Davis nor the tedious lessons of the pedagogues who served under him did anything to alter."

Chesterton's childhood in South Africa ended abruptly in 1911 when he was sent to a prep-school in England. The legacy he carried back to England on this second visit was that of a colonial's upbringing and what this lacked in formal education was not compensated for by private study. Basically he had absorbed the patriotic jingoism, racial paternalism and basic conservatism of South African Uitlander society. His stepfather had only arrived in South Africa in order to fight for the British Empire and at the age of ten Kenneth Chesterton had joined the Transvaal Cadets.<sup>81</sup>

The net result of this patriotic and military socialization can be seen in a short essay written just after his arrival in England. In it he displays his twelve year old world picture - an Empire centred patriotism - which is expressed in heroic prose:<sup>82</sup>

"are first impressions best.

My first impressions of England.

A.K.Chesterton  
Sole author.

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It was on a foggy morn that I renewed my acquaintance with England at Plymouth. There I witnessed with both my eyes, a British Man-O-War. The dim outline of distant hills was visible, all that was visible of the cradle of the British Empire. But I did not hear (sic) set foot on English soil.

Next morn I awoke and found myself at the seaport of London - Southhampton (sic) - which was the end of my sea voyage. There with much grief and many tears I left the good ship Dunluce Castle. So many tears in fact that his oil skin coat alone saved the Chief Officer from a bad attack of Rheumatic Fever.

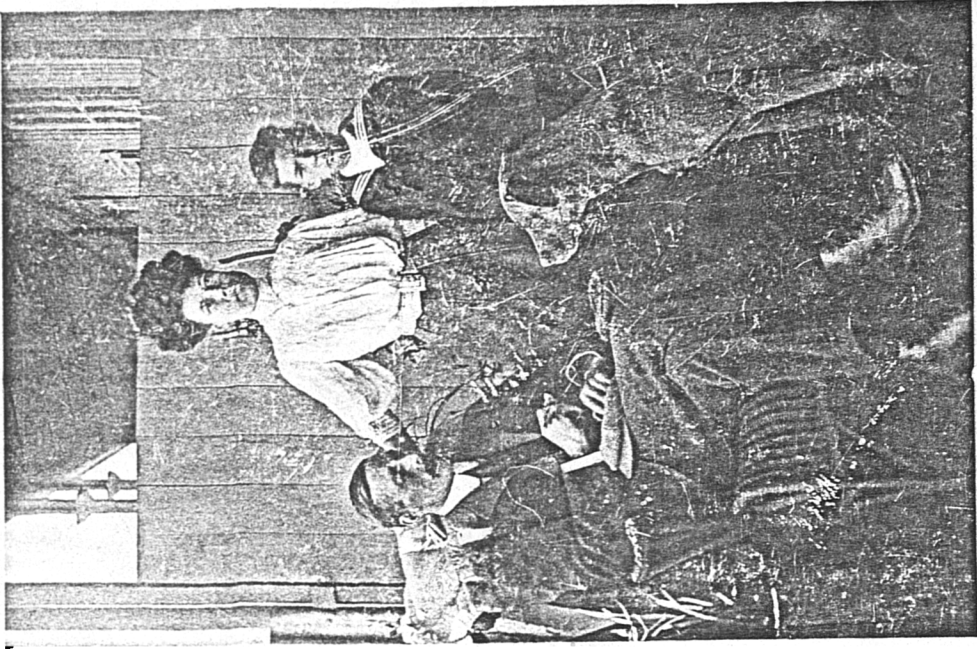
Three cheers was given for the Boat-in-which we had braved the peril of the deep with ever so great a will. My right foot was first planted on English sod at Southampton. In the train being informed by my uncle at (sic) the scenery was generally admired. I in a spirit of true patriotism replied that it was not half so good as the mines in Joh'burg.

As in a dream I arrived at Waterloo station in London and before I knew where I was I found myself in my Grandmothers (sic) arms.

To be continued next week.

Already his ability to write is showing through in spite of his lack of formal education. And through the obviously light hearted treatment of his arrival in England can be seen the image of a boy bewildered by the huge change of circumstances that was taking place. It must indeed have seemed like a "dream", if not a nightmare. The only major aspect missing from this piece is that of his familiarity with a society divided on racial grounds. His first thoughts on this issue at the time were recalled by him over sixty

years later in his autobiography. He remembered that while on the train travelling from Southampton to London: "I gazed with interest out of the train window at the strange sight of white men working with picks and shovels and doing a multiplicity of jobs with which I had never learnt to associate them."<sup>83</sup> If ever there was a graphic illustration of the power of socialization upon a child, then this is it. He was certainly destined to find things different in England.



With his mother and step-father  
in South Africa - 1908.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BOYS WHO MARCH AWAY

Does your agony of the East make you forget the agony of the West, Ling Sung? Wensdale taught two hundred and nineteen young men how to die.

A.K Chesterton: Address Valhalla.

Arriving in England in 1911 for the second time in his young life and fresh from the social elitism and jingoistic patriotism of British South Africa Kenneth Chesterton was, in theory at least, well equipped both socially and ideologically to cope with the ethos of the English public school system. His temperamental disinclination to enjoy formal learning and his solitary childhood was, however, a less promising basis for such a transition. As one would anticipate, given his mother's disposition, his grandparents and the rest of the Herne Hill household (Uncle Sidney and his wife, and aunts Elizabeth, Alice and Margaret) were not consulted about the arrangements. Out of the blue they received a cable from his mother instructing them to meet the boy at Southampton and to register him at Brightlands, the prep-school for Dulwich College.\*

He arrived "like a parcel"<sup>1</sup> according to his aunts, subject yet again to his mother's capricious nature, and was initially the object of some resentment in his paternal grandparents' home. Grandfather Arthur Chesterton and his wife were too old to enthuse over the presence of a boisterous youngster in the house, while the aunts, who had smothered him with love as a baby, were appalled at his boyish adolescence. Alice, who had mothered him during his first stay, bemoaned the fact that the little boy whom she had so cherished had turned into a "young savage"<sup>2</sup>

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\*The letter written to Arthur's aunt Alice by himself and Ethel in 1895 was sent from a house in Dulwich and ends with the phrase "Everybody at No 31 sends love", in Ethel's hand. (3)



But perhaps it would be unwise to judge the child too harshly from these remarks. For the Chesterton household would appear to have been rather genteel, at least according to Cecil Chesterton's wife who recalled being introduced to this branch of the Chesterton family by G.K.'s mother, who:<sup>4</sup>

"was very anxious that I should make a good impression, and tactfully suggested my sartorial line.

'Wear something pretty darling,' said she, 'but not too smart. The Chestertons are very dear, but rather worthy'.

I always felt this was an apt description of the family."

Yet, in spite of the rather cloistered atmosphere this must have created for the boy, it was not uncongenial. Indeed, Mrs Cecil Chesterton remembered A.K.'s grandfather with great affection in her autobiography:<sup>5</sup>

"My favourite was uncle Arthur, an extremely charming and handsome man, who was always well dressed with a marvellous taste in ties and literature. He was a commercial traveller, and had a gorgeous collection of humorous stories of the people and places he encountered in his travels".

While Doris Chesterton, drawing on conversations she had with the aunts at a later date and with her husband, suggests:<sup>6</sup>

"Grandma Chesterton was by way of being a hypochondriac and Grandpa quite a dear....Alice, who wrote for children and was fond of them, did her best I am sure to make him feel at home. Elizabeth set herself to be a sort of guardian angel, and kept it up, when given the opportunity, until her dying day. Maggie, the youngest of the aunts, was rather afraid of him and once burst into tears when he teased her calling her 'Maggie' without the aunt. Sidney...was also kind to Kenneth in his own way. Kenneth remembered how he and Sidney would walk out in Ruskin Park together on Sundays, sedately with hat, gloves and cane, as gentlemen should... Elizabeth and Alice and Grandpa quickly realized his ability to express himself in words. Elizabeth typed out some of his efforts, notably (when he was about fourteen) a full length and very amusing play about the reactions of the Gods come down from Olympus to inspect the modern world".\*

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\*Unfortunately the manuscript would seem to have been lost.

Of the intellectual influence exerted by the worthy Chestertons the only acknowledgement made by Chesterton appears in his autobiography where he admits to have "been under the influence of an uncle who called himself a rationalist".<sup>7</sup>\* But, on the whole he was unimpressed: "I contrasted the neat, well-regulated but restricted life of suburbia with the freedom of the mines and felt that England was not made for small boys of twelve."<sup>8</sup>

His attitude was soon to change, however. Brightlands (the prep school for Dulwich College) lived up to its name and proved to be one of the more enlightened of its genre. In the buoyant atmosphere he discovered an interest in formal learning for the first time in his life:<sup>9</sup>

"The zeal of working in the class-room was matched by the joy of the playing fields. During the breaks there was the 'yard-game' - ferocious soccer in a confined space, with masters and boys going hell-for-leather after a tennis ball. There was cricket during the long mellow summer evenings and in the winter rugby football on the crisp exhilarating afternoons."

In this environment of zest and laughter a crucial change took place; he discovered a deep "love" for England: "England then, I decided, come hell or high water, was my country".<sup>10</sup> Chesterton never understood the irony of the circumstances which surrounded his adoption of this vision of England. For it was a very idealized vision, formed under most unusual circumstances. For this was a period in British history marked by uncertainty both at home and abroad, with industrial decline and class confrontation the key notes of the era.<sup>11</sup> The England with which

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\*"Aunts and uncle Sidney were 'enlightened agnostics' - who seemed nevertheless to be bound by the 10 Commandments - faultless lives". Letter to the author from Doris Chesterton - undated.

he had fallen in love simply didn't exist outside the very special circumstances of Brightlands and a few other particularly enlightened educational establishments. It certainly did not exist at his senior public school.

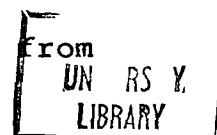
Prior to his natural transfer from Brightlands to Dulwich college another cable arrived from his mother, this time instructing his guardians to send him to Berkhamsted - the public school in Hertfordshire.<sup>12</sup> (This is yet another example of Ethel Chesterton's capricious nature.) In one stroke of parental choice he lost his prep-school friends and moved on to a completely different kind of institution and, in Chesterton's own opinion, his experiences there were responsible for reinforcing "the disbelief in education which I had acquired in South Africa."<sup>13</sup>

The headmaster was one Charles Greene (the father of the novelist Graham Greene, who attended the school at roughly the same time as Chesterton, being about two years younger) and the atmosphere of the school was distinctly muted after Brightlands:<sup>14</sup>

"Nobody showed the slightest awareness that I existed. It was not the done thing at Berkhamsted to recognize the existence of new boys.

Had the bathos of my entry been compensated by any subsequent heartiness I would not have felt bitter about it. But there was no heartiness at any rate in the School House. Life was lived in a perpetual minor key. It was not very good form even to laugh....the masters, with three or four exceptions were dull pedants under whose auspices I retired from all competition in the class-room and sat heavy with tedium at the bottom of the form".

He was by no means alone in his dislike of the school. Ben Greene the cousin of Graham Greene (and a friend of Chesterton's in later years) was a contemporary of both boys at the school. Many years later he went back to the school to show Doris Chesterton around and she recalls that: "He sighed deeply



time to time as if the memory were stifling him. 'O the misery!'"<sup>15</sup>  
 Rex Tremlett, a colleague of Chesterton's in the B.U.F., was there a decade later and also remembered the place without affection.<sup>16</sup> But perhaps the most damning criticism of the school has come from Graham Greene himself, who registered his undying loathing of the place in his autobiography. He writes of: "the school - part rosy Tudor, part hideous modern brick the colour of dolls'-house plaster hams - where the misery of life started".<sup>17</sup>  
 In more detail he writes of the strict censorship imposed against reading books from home and:<sup>18</sup>

"the lavatories without locks, where each newcomer, anxious to perform his morning duty, had to call out 'Number off' in order to learn which of the compartments was empty; and that rule for Sunday walks which made certain that no one, under any circumstances, would ever walk dangerously alone. Unhappiness in a child accumulates because he sees no end to the dark tunnel. The thirteen weeks of a term might just as well have been thirteen years. The unexpected never happens. Unhappiness is a daily routine. I imagine that a man condemned to a long prison sentence feels much the same..... loneliness....the sense of continuous grime, of unlocked lavatory doors, the odour of farts".

Many years later Greene returned to the school in order to undertake research for a novel on the subject. Returning from the scene of his childhood misery he abandoned the project: "I couldn't bear mentally living again for several years in those surroundings. A leper colony in the Congo was preferable".<sup>19</sup>

To Kenneth Chesterton, who had been raised in the bright atmosphere of the Johannesburg mining district, who used to walk a mile each way to school through the African veld without any supervision, and who had spent hours playing amongst the spoil heaps and drainage pools of the mines, all this must have seemed to add up to a cruel confinement.

Many years later Chesterton wrote in retrospect that:<sup>20</sup>

"Had the masters at Berkhamsted when making out their terminal reports on me, been in possession of the reports on me at Brightlands, would they have asked themselves why the Brightlands masters places me first in almost every subject, adding words of praise, whereas they placed me last in most subjects and added words of dispraise? Upon my word, I almost believe that it should be the masters who get the cane!"\*

Nonetheless, Berkhamsted did have a positive impact upon him, reinforcing his already strong sense of patriotism. He was an enthusiastic member of the school O.T.C., whose parades, in the wake of the first battles of the 1914-18 war, were remembered by Graham Greene as having an air of "deadly gravity".<sup>21</sup> Greene also paints a vivid picture of almost cretinous "war fever", with the German master denounced to his father as a spy because he was seen under a railway bridge without a hat, and a dachshund stoned in the High Street.<sup>22\*\*</sup> While Christopher Isherwood remembered that as the war ended his school came to contain the remnants of public school military socialization: "boys who had only just missed being conscripted, potential infantry officers trained to expect the brief violent career of the trenches: they had outgrown their school life long before they left it".<sup>23</sup> But in 1914 the certainties were still intact. In the hot August of 1914 troops passed through Berkhamsted and rested in the pastoral charm of the village

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\*Oswald Mosley was equally dismissive of his public school education: "It seemed to me a trivial existence, 'cribbed, cabined and confined', by many of the silliest shibboleths of the bourgeois world... Apart from games, the dreary waste of public school existence was only relieved by learning and homosexuality; at that time I had no capacity for the former and I never had any taste for the latter". Oswald Mosley, My Life, Nelson, London, 1968, p35. All this is reminiscent of Fritz Stern's findings about the way in which such attitudes in an intelligent child can widen the gulf between themselves and conventional society. See above, Introduction, pxvi.

\*\*Chesterton also remembered the dachshund incident. See Action, August 6th, 1936, p14.

green.<sup>24</sup>

None of this had escaped the attention of Chesterton and, when his parents came to England in 1915, he managed to persuade them that it was useless for him to stay at Berkhamsted. "Charles Greene was no more anxious to keep me than I was to stay. He told my people that I showed no inclination to work except when my interest was aroused, which, he added, was seldom. I do not suppose that he showed any awareness that it should be the duty of the teachers to arouse the interest of the taught."<sup>25</sup> Young Chesterton, no doubt more satisfied with his mother's whimsical nature than ever before, thus found himself on the Dunluce Castle under happier circumstances than his last trip. For now he was outward bound for South Africa. On board: "I heard my mother discussing me with a friend... 'Since he didn't do any good at school, we are going to put him into a newspaper office', she said. I had other ideas"<sup>26</sup>.

Indeed he had. Unable to enlist in *England because he was not even seventeen yet*, he intended to enlist as a volunteer for Smut's East African Campaign against German Imperialism in the region. As he was almost six feet tall already, and as in this remote corner of the war volunteers were accepted with the minimum of formality, he was readily accepted into His Majesty's armed forces as a private. Thus it transpired that: "before my seventeenth birthday was reached I had been in the thick of three battles in which men had shot to kill"<sup>27</sup>.

The long legacy of patriotism had finally found an outlet

for expression. Years later, writing of the naive belief that this was to be a war to make the world safe for civilization, Chesterton recalled that: "We believed it with all the idealism of our silly, but by no means ignoble young souls."<sup>28</sup> Like so many of his generation he had been "in the pride of my youth trumpeted to battle by Rupert Brooke"<sup>29</sup>.

In spite of the unsettled nature of Chesterton's childhood (which was about to reach an abrupt and brutal conclusion) there is a sense of continuity - military continuity - running through it. Chesterton seemed to sense this when he penned the following reflection during the Second World War:<sup>30</sup>

"I was born within a couple of miles of the spot where Jameson and his men came to grief and the detonations of the raid were still exploding at the time of my birth. At the age of six months I was packed into a refugee train as Briton and Boer in grim earnest sprang to arms. Five years later, looking out of the window of our little house, I caught my first glimpse of bodies of men engaged in deadly combat, as Bantu and Chinese labourers on the mines fought each other with knives and knobkerries until dispersed by an imposing charge by the mounted police. A few months later I saw excited men, with banners and bands, marching up and down the Main Reef Road in one of the first labour disputes which so often bathed the Witwatersrand in blood. Still a child - sixteen years to be exact - I marched and fought as a South African infantryman over the vast wastes of German East Africa".

He also came to acknowledge the important role played by his public school background in reinforcing his already strong sense of Imperial patriotism. In a short story (really a piece of third person autobiography, the mode of expression he favoured when dealing with his own life) called Address Valhalla,<sup>31</sup> he attempted to express the tragic consequences of public school military socialization.

In the story he telescoped Brightlands and Berkhamsted into one institution which he called "Wensdale". One of his best friends from Brightlands, a Chinese by the name of Hing Sung Mok,

appears as Ling Sung, while his own persona seems to be shared between two of the characters - 'Chilvers' and the bizarrely nicknamed 'Flapjack',<sup>32</sup>

The autobiographical nature of this piece becomes apparent from Chilvers' reaction to the arrival of Ling Sung:<sup>33</sup>

"Chilvers happened to have been born in India, where his people still were, and that circumstance doubtless added to his imagination which hitherto had not achieved any lustre at Wensdale. He remembered his own first arrival as a chilly and frightening business, even though in his case he had landed among animals of the same race and tradition as his own".

The plot of the story, however, bears no resemblance to any actual events, with Chilvers killed in action on the Western Front in 1915 and Ling Sung dying fighting the Japanese in the Second World War. Their friendship is reborn in their sons who become friends after the deaths of their fathers.

The exact meaning of Chesterton's allegorical tale is not clear. Perhaps he is commenting on the way the war revealed the naivety of his pre-war vision of world events. In that case the deaths of Chilvers and Ling Sung in action can be seen as the death of their innocence, while the continued friendship through their two sons represents the re-birth of new and tragically wiser men.

But one thing is clear. He is suggesting that the public school system had prepared him mentally for a conflict which proved beyond his emotional means and that this was the case with all his comrades. This becomes apparent in an exchange between Flapjack and Ling Sung, shortly before the latter's death:<sup>34</sup>

over/.....



"Soon Ling Sung began to ask him about his old school-fellows. In his impatience he reeled off a list of names, without waiting for replies about individuals. How were they? where were they? What were they doing?

'Most of those names are enshrined upon a great tablet in the Chapel,' Flapjack replied, when at length the other paused.

He went on to meet the inquiry of his comrade's eyes: 'Does your agony of the East make you forget our agony of the West, Ling Sung? Wensdale taught two hundred and nineteen young men how to die.' "

In this piece Chesterton seems to be putting forward the same sentiments as those expressed by Douglas Goldring, who observed that the public school cast of mind, taken by its willing pupils straight from the playing fields and the prefect's study into the First World War, was as inappropriate for withstanding the shock of the experience: "as the imitation suit of armour, the dummy lance and the shield of the actor in a pageant" would have been.<sup>35</sup>

The actual events surrounding his enlistment serve to illustrate yet again Ethel Chesterton's self-assertive and "non-reflective" personality. She was furious at first, threatening to write to Kitchener about his age. However:<sup>36</sup>

"At the height of the storm some friends called to welcome my mother home and I slipped into another room, glad to escape. Soon I heard her seeking their sympathy. 'What do you think Kenneth has done?' she asked rhetorically. 'Without a word to George or myself he has gone and joined the army!'

No sympathy was forthcoming.

'But how splendid', said one woman.

'Absolutely splendid', said another.

'And to think he is only sixteen.'

Perhaps all of us are more open to suggestion than we suppose. I think (and I hope that this is not being unjust to her memory) that my mother instantly perceived the Kudos of having a son only sixteen in the army.

When George Horne came home from his shift she told him in very mild tones, of the misdeed which earlier had so enraged her. He was not a demonstrative man, which made me value all the more the glance he shot at me.

"Do you understand what enlisting means?" he asked.

"I think so, Uncle George".

"Do you realise....you will have to do fatigues such as carrying and emptying lavatory buckets?"

It did not seem a glamorous prospect but I accepted it without dismay."

The battle was won, and little more than a week later the boy found himself on an overcrowded troop train bound for Potchefstroom and mass attestation and induction into the army. They were to be part of Smuts' South African Expeditionary Force, which was being raised and sent to East Africa to relieve the British Imperial forces in the war of attrition against the German troops commanded by the wily and brilliant General Paul Von Lettow-Vorbeck.<sup>37</sup>

On the train bound for Potchefstroom he received the first of several brutal introductions to the seamier side of adult life. The language of the Witwatersrand working class was highly spiced with obscenities from both the English and Afrikaans languages. Nor was this the only medium in which they could swear. Whenever the train stopped to pick up new recruits they indulged themselves by shouting pornographic phrases in Zulu at the Bantu natives watching the proceedings. Chesterton was still sufficiently innocent to have no fixed ideas about the meaning of any of the words used, in any of the three languages, in spite of the fact that he recognized many of them. "All I did know was that they were regarded as highly improper."<sup>38</sup>

At Potchefstroom they were detailed to spend the night in eight man tents - sixteen to a tent. In Chesterton's tent a 'farting contest' took place which left him with a life-long olifactory image of the evening: "It is impossible to describe the resulting odour."<sup>39</sup>

Next day, during the sorting out of the men into battalions, companies, platoons and sections, with a little manoeuvring he was able to shake off most of the men with whom he had spent

the night and was eventually allotted to the 12th Platoon, C Company of the 5th South African Infantry.<sup>40</sup>

The majority of this company were Afrikaners. Among those of British extraction remembered by Chesterton was Alan Law, a cousin of Bonar Law - later to become British Prime Minister. The "army" was still basically a citizen force without proper leadership and the N.C.O.s were chosen largely by guesswork. This became apparent when one man chose to celebrate his appointment as a sergeant by getting drunk and kicking a young private in the teeth, which act he followed by informing the soldier that he - the sergeant - had often had sexual relations with the lad's mother. A corporal boasted that he often had relations with his nine sisters and that before leaving home he had copulated with every one of them. Yet another corporal ("one of the Rand Gangsters") voiced the sentiment that he desired that the Germans should kill half the "bastards" so that there would be more food to share among the rest.<sup>41</sup>

Things went from bad to worse:<sup>42</sup>

"In little more than a month, about four thousand of us were packed into the Laconia (later sunk) which had normal passenger accommodation for about 800, and set sail from Durban for Killindini. It was a fearful voyage, torrid, with space both on deck and below so crowded that it was almost impossible to move. In the centre of the ship was cleared a great space in which had been placed about 20 baths, flanked on both sides by about forty lavatory seats, all uncompart-mented. At the two ends were urinals, so that it was impossible to determine whence came the liquid which swished about all over the area. The nasal, visual and tactile effects could not be described as aesthetic."

From Kilindini they marched to Mombassa and then were taken by train to Maktau: "some of us preferred to bake inside the cattle trucks, others to frizzle on their iron roofs."<sup>43</sup> Then from Maktau the tired men were again on the march, this time to

Mbundi, from whence they were to launch the conquest of German East Africa.

The German East African campaign has been aptly described by one historian as "long, costly and inconclusive."<sup>44</sup> The campaign lasted for the full duration of the First World War. The official British fatality figures were 62,220, of whom 48,328 had died of disease, mostly malaria. But these figures failed to take into account the many thousands who had died in hospitals.

It was the unhealthiest theatre of the entire war, with two thirds of the deaths caused by disease and one leading officer wrote in his diary: "What Smuts saves on the battlefield, he loses in hospital, for it is Africa and its climate we are really fighting, not the Germans."<sup>45</sup> The troops, heavily laden and kitted in the European style, were badly decimated, with the 9th South African Infantry, reduced from 1,135 men to 120 in twelve months, largely by disease. As a result the proportion of deaths to wounded and prisoners in the casualty figures was far higher in the East African campaign than on any of the other fronts in the First World War.<sup>46</sup> And into this tropical hell-hole came Kenneth Chesterton, sixteen years of age, and imbued with an heroic vision of gallantry and heroism in the cause of King and country.

Chesterton's memories were, inevitably, vivid - too vivid for him to include them in his largely anecdotal autobiography, where he began the chapter dealing with this period of his life with the following admission:<sup>47</sup>

"Let there be no fear that grim reminiscences of battle will follow. I am concerned in this book with queer or unusual situations, with bizarre episodes...Such background as I provide is solely to give coherence to these events and... people."

Fortunately for posterity he was far less reticent during the inter-war period when his growing despair provoked from him torrents of words about his personal experiences of war.

With regard to the German East campaign his fullest statement appeared in the Torquay press in 1929, in an article entitled "Jungle March on a Cup of Flour." The piece fully expresses the torment experienced by the young boy and his comrades for the fourteen months he was involved in the war.<sup>48</sup> His descriptions of the physical and mental privations are graphic. Apparently all went well at first, with morale high during the night-time storming of Latima-Reata redoubt and it remained so for several weeks more, even after the men had experienced their first taste of dysentery and malaria. But as they swung across Himo bridge to engage in the main invasion of the country they began to discover the three deadliest enemies of the war - hunger, the elements and disease - three insufferable foes. Chesterton, writing in the third person, takes up the story:<sup>49</sup>

"For months on end they trudged ever further into the jungle, cutting their own way through its lacerating foliage whenever safari paths failed them, and often having to fight for their water against the enemy rearguard in the evening, suffering the torrid heat of the sun by day, and being tormented beyond endurance by swarms of mosquitos at night; and all this on one cup of flour a day!

Fancy marching fifteen to thirty miles a day for months and months upon a cup of flour a day."

But worse was in store. The British and South African troops were caught by the second rainy season literally hundreds of miles from their tents and waterproofs. This left them with absolutely no option:

over/.....

"but to lie in their little one-man trenches and be soaked and flogged by the downpours which came night after night without intermission for the whole of the season. Next day the sun would dry their clothes as they marched.

Malaria and dysentery, moreover, played havoc with the men's souls no less than with their bodies. By the end of August 1916, a column on the march resembled nothing so much as a gigantic game of leap-frog, being composed of an unending stream of men falling out by the wayside and then doubling pitifully back to resume their places in the marching sections of fours."

Chesterton summed up his feelings about the war in graphic prose:

"the campaign took so much energy out of a man that even in retrospect his imagination is hedged around by the eternal African bush while his entire spirit seems to him to have been sapped for the time being by unconscionable privations that denied the soul any claim to its dominion."

After fourteen months his torment finally ended when he narrowly escaped death after being left by the wayside to die because he was too ill to march any further. Fortunately he was discovered by a group of Africans who took care of him and handed him over to some army telegraph men. After his miraculous escape from death he was sent home to convalesce and his parents showed sufficient common sense to admit to the army that he was still only seventeen and secure his prompt discharge. Apart from his mental anguish his experiences had left him with tertiary malignant malaria (for which he had received overdoses of quinine) and amoebic dysentery.

Yet in spite of all this, so strong was Chesterton's wish to continue fighting for his British Imperial ideals that he now persuaded his parents to send him to Britain in order that he might train as an officer for service on the Western Front. For, as Doris Chesterton remembers: "He was one of those who really believed in the war and the principle for which it was fought...Kenneth considered the British Empire to have been the

highest flowering of civilization."<sup>50</sup> So, at the still tender age of seventeen, but with fourteen months of fighting behind him, Chesterton set sail once again for England and yet another brutal introduction to war, this time to the carnage of the British trenches on the Somme.

Having been introduced to the War Office in London, Chesterton was sent on to the 7th Officer Cadet Brigade in Fermoy, Southern Ireland. At the Moor Park training centre in Fermoy he remembered that the training officers were so glad to have escaped from the Western Front that they were each determined not to be outdone by their colleagues in the display of officer cadet instructor zeal. It seems that one device was to appear to know every cadet's name from the first day of their arrival. Unfortunately for Chesterton his was a nomenclature which seemed to stick in their memory:<sup>51</sup>

"..'Swing those arms, Chesterton!', one would shout, looking at a section of column where I was not to be found.  
'Change step, Chesterton!', roared somebody else, looking at another part of the column which also lacked the pleasure and delight of my company."

But such minor problems were soon to be eclipsed by the grim realities of trench warfare. He was originally commissioned as a draft conducting officer for the South African Infantry Brigade in France, but this was not to his liking and upon his arrival in England he succeeded in obtaining a transfer to the 2nd City of London Regiment. Thereby he ensured his immediate induction into the Front Line.

He arrived in France in the Spring of 1917, to join the later stages of a theatre of war which has been accurately described as the most "ironic" war in history.<sup>52</sup> Seldom before or since has



Chesterton, shortly after receiving his commission  
in 1917.



a war produced a military means so melodramatically disproportionate to its actual ends, or been peopled by officers and men so innocent of this fact at the outset. "Never such innocence again", observed Philip Larkin.<sup>53</sup> And for Chesterton, entering the trenches from another, more conventional, war of movement and skirmishes, the certainties about what they were fighting for remained intact.

To attempt to bring this trench war into the category of other wars simply by dignifying the proceedings in terms of "great battles", would be to totally misunderstand the tragic uniqueness of the military situation which had developed in Northern France. For once the 25,000 miles of trenches had been constructed and the forces marshalled on either side, they produced their own dynamic which lifted the solution out of the hands of a largely incompetent officer elite and the bankrupt politicians of the European powers. The very word "entrenched", which entered the language during this period, suggested a stubborn unwillingness to give way against all the facts. The four hundred miles of front line contained a trench system which, with minor changes of a few hundred yards and a few miles during the "great" occasions, remained fixed from the winter of 1914 to the spring of 1918. The trenches were more than a military system, they developed within them a complete social system which provided an alternative to the norms of civilian existence. Like a prison they were both hated and loved by their inmates.

During the major battles literally tens of thousands of men

were killed or wounded each day. In the early part of 1914 the "Retreat from Mons" was halted by the "Battle of the Marne" when combined British and French forces stopped the German advance at the terrible cost of half a million dead or injured on both sides. After only four months of this war of attrition, the fighting had all but wiped out the original British Army. During 1915 the British lost 60,000 men at both the "Second Battle of Ypres", and the offensive of Neuve Chappelle. While in the "Battle of the Somme" on July 1st 1916, the British alone lost over 60,000 killed or wounded in that one day! But perhaps the most graphic statistic of all concerns the quietest interludes in the fighting, for during those periods some 7,000 British officers and men were killed or injured daily. (The General Staff called it "Wastage".) Also, after a big attack it could be several days before the injured in No Man's Land stopped crying out, while the sound of rats feeding on the corpses of the dead could be clearly heard each night.<sup>54</sup>

The so called "Great War" ended with the cost to the Central Powers of three and a half million dead, and five million to the Allies. It cost Kenneth Chesterton his youth and his health. Worse still, he became an alcoholic:<sup>55</sup>

"It is not for me to pass judgement on the subject of excessive drinking. Emerging from the last war with taut-strung nerves and a system shaken by dysentery and malaria I became an addict, and a long and fearful struggle took place before I got the better of it..."

Finally, it crucially confirmed and altered his beliefs with regard to social and political ideals.

But before turning to a discussion of the exact nature of the impact of the war on Chesterton, it is necessary to develop one theme around the fact that his memories of the carnage were

to find expression through the medium of an imagination inspired by literary preoccupations. For, as we shall see, Chesterton emerged from the war to become a talented literary critic and was eventually to develop a distinctly metaphysical outlook on social and political matters.\*

For Chesterton the war must have represented an environment for self-education, especially when he entered the highly socialized world of trench warfare. There is no direct evidence of this as Chesterton chose never to discuss this side of the war in print. But it is difficult to imagine how he could have come to so deep an understanding of drama and poetry by the mid 1920s unless he had continued to read such material during the interludes between engagements with the enemy.

A great deal has been written about the "literary" nature of the war, at least among the officer class. The war was fought in close proximity to Southern England, indeed those who lived in the home counties could sometimes hear the sound of battle if the wind was in the right direction. More significantly London was not too far away either and London newspapers and magazines found their way into the trenches with comparative ease. The officer class itself was largely made up of ex-public school men, many of whom should have been at university during this period of their lives (Chesterton is a case in point). Such men were bound to continue to develop their interests in the classics and literature (the staple diet of the English public school at that time) whilst in the trenches. Of course, one would expect to find men like Graves, Sassoon, Blunden and

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\*See below: Chapters Four and Five.

Owen full of literary aspiration, but their mood was shared by many lesser intellects at that time.

By far the best survey of this attitude available at the present time is that of Paul Fussell, who has written a superb evocation of the wartime literary ethos and its consequences for the way men like Chesterton came to view the war in retrospect. He writes that:<sup>56</sup>

"The American Civil War was the first, Theodor Ropp observes, 'in which really large numbers of literate men fought as common soldiers'. By 1914 it was possible for soldiers to be not merely literate but vigorously literary, for the Great War occurred at a special historical moment when two 'liberal' forces were powerfully coinciding in England. On the one hand, the belief in the educative powers of classical English literature was still extremely strong. On the other hand, the appeal of popular education and "self-improvement" was at its peak, and such education was still conceived largely in humanistic terms...The intersection of these two forces, the one 'aristocratic', the other 'democratic', established an atmosphere of public respect for literature unique in modern times...There were few of any rank who had not been assured that the greatest of modern literatures was the English and who did not feel an appropriate pleasure in that assurance...In 1914 there was virtually no cinema; there was no radio at all; and there was certainly no television. Except for sex and drinking, amusement was largely found in language formally arranged, either in books and periodicals or at the theatre and the music hall, or in one's own or in one's friends' anecdotes, rumors, or clever structuring of words. It is hard for us to recover imaginatively such a world, but we must imagine it if we are to understand the way 'literature' dominated the war from beginning to end."

From this basic understanding Fussell goes on to develop a complex and very illuminating theory about the impact of these themes, myths and essentially literary resources upon the nature of memoirs relating to the carnage. In the context of the present study two elements of his discussion are of great importance. The first relates to the tendency in English memoirs of the war to utilize theatre imagery. Of this Fussell writes that:<sup>57</sup>

"Remarque, in All Quiet...enacts a mad and quite un-British Gothic fantasia as a group of badly disorganized German troops is shelled in a civilian cemetery. Graves are torn asunder, coffins are hurled in the air, old cadavers are flung out - and the narrator and his chums preserve themselves by crawling into the coffins and covering themselves with the stinking cerements. This will remind us less of Hamlet than of, say, The Monk....The British way is more phlegmatic and ironic, more conscious that if the war is not real, it must be not real in a more understandable, social way."

Fussell goes on to suggest that one of the main reasons for this tendency of the British to fuse memories of the war with the imagery of theatre is linked to the British awareness of possessing Shakespeare as a major national asset:<sup>58</sup>

"to indicate the special presence of Shakespeare in English writing about the war all one has to do is point to Frederic Manning's novel Her Privates We (1930) and try and imagine it as a French, German, or American performance. From its title (Hamlet, II, ii, 233) to its Shakespearian chapter-headings and its constant awareness of Henry V at Agincourt, it is permeated with a consciousness of Shakespeare not just as a literary, but specifically as a theatrical resource..."

The second area of Fussell's work which is of direct interest here lies in his discussion of the changes in language brought about by the war, destroying the "raised" and "essentially feudal" language of the pre-war age of innocence. Fussell presents a table of equivalents to highlight his point, of which the following is an edited extract:<sup>59</sup>

"A friend is a - comrade; the enemy is - the foe, or host;  
Bravery considered after the fact is - valour; the dead of  
the battle field are - the fallen; Warfare is - strife;  
Actions are - deeds; Cowardice results in - dishonour; not  
to complain is - manly; the soldier is a - warrior; one's  
death is one's - fate; the sky is - the heavens; things that  
shine are - radiant; what is contemptible is - base; the legs  
and arms of young men are - limbs; the blood of young men is -  
'the red/Sweet wine of youth'.(R. Brooke.)

These two strands of Fussell's argument are useful in an

analysis of Chesterton, because he was prone to using both Shakespearian imagery and, on occasion, the "raised" high diction of the pre-war literary genre, when recalling his wartime experiences. Thus, in an article written in 1927, he recalled the "valour" of the men, and the way they "drank death like wine", ending with a salute to the "deathless heroism of their race".<sup>60</sup> In another he wrote of the "warriors" of the battlefield.<sup>61</sup> While he spoke of young soldiers who "leapt upon death as though it were a rigger ball", (an indirect reference to Shakespeare's Percy Hotspur from Henry IV, Part I.)<sup>62</sup> An even more classical vein runs through the following piece, which was written in 1928:<sup>63</sup>

"Ajax defied the lightning, and was accounted brave. Thomas Atkins defied ten thousand streaks of lightning, and was accounted nothing out of the ordinary. O strange, valiant, inexplicable humanity, what is thy ultimate destiny that thy immortal soul must pass through cauldrons such as these without perceptible reward."

But easily the best way of exemplifying his literary style, while at the same time illustrating his anguish at perceiving in retrospect that the ends achieved were unworthy of the heroic and terrible means employed, is to undertake an analysis of his review of R.C. Sherriff's famous play Journey's End.<sup>63</sup>

Chesterton reviewed the play when it appeared for the first time at the Malvern Festival, in 1928.<sup>64</sup> He was one of the few critics to give it a really favourable review and Sherriff was so delighted with it that he sent Chesterton a signed copy with a lengthy personal dedication enscribed within.\* Indeed, so

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\*Unfortunately this book was destroyed in a fire at the Chesterton's home in the early 1930s, and although Sherriff sent a replacement, many years later, the inscription is impersonal. See, Interview with Doris L. Chesterton - May 9th, 1978.

kind was the inscription, that when several years later Chesterton published a book of some of his dramatic criticism, he wrote that it had "acted as an incentive for the making of this book".<sup>66</sup> The book also begins with a reprint of the original review.

Chesterton began his review by quoting from Swinburne and Shakespeare. The <sup>quotation</sup> from Shakespeare is interesting since, although it contains the title of the play within it, it is not that which Sherriff had in mind (Othello, V, ii, 263-285), but rather the lines from Twelfth Night, II, iii, 42 - "Journeys end in lovers meeting/Every wise man's son doth know." He then continues in his own words:<sup>67</sup>

"Here was a journey which did not end in lovers meeting, unless it be reckoned that Stanhope, having travelled with whisky to the boundaries of solace, now met such grief that he grew enamoured of death, and finally ascended the dug-out steps to keep tryst with his love. Things happen like that in France. As a man faints when bodily pain becomes intolerable, so does his mind in course of time become numb with mental anguish. The sparkle goes out of him - and the fear. He no longer seeks protection; on the contrary the half of him that is still alive longs for reunion with the half that has gone before. He awaits journey's end, and the great oblivion."

If readers detect a slide from dramatic criticism to Chesterton's personal anguish - released by the closeness of the play to his own experiences - they are not mistaken. This tendency is destined to grow as the review proceeds, until Chesterton can actually be seen as Stanhope, the hero of Sherriff's play, reviewing his own life. That the two merge is not due to Chesterton's narcissism, or egocentricity, but rather because of the very real similarity between the fictional character and the man who spent over four years of his life at war, with the last two as an officer on the Western Front.

As Chesterton says, commenting on the way Sherriff manages in the play to create a feeling of timelessness in the dug-out before the final suicidal raid by Osborne and Raleigh takes place:

"A day was placed altogether amongst the timeless things. Six days almost baffled the imagination of man. And Captain Stanhope endured three years of it!"

There now follows a passage which reflects Chesterton's command of the 'classical' style, and in which he loses himself completely to his memories of battle:

"Reflect, too, that not only did the devastating enginery of war scatter terror over the land, but it actually lent a suggestion of ghastliness to the very hours. One came to hate, not so much the guns, but the days which reverberated with their roar. The arrival of each dawn was like the coming of the crack of doom, full of wild dread and the ever present possibility of death. The first glimmer of the sunrise seemed to open up a hundred thousand graves, waiting to be filled. No better was the night, the kindly night, which should have been as a cloak to cover the scars and hurts of the day, but which was instinct with a million cruel eyes, flashing out tidings of implacable anger and hostility. How one came to loathe the melancholy flights from the star shells, as they rose gracefully in the air, dropped to earth and flickered fitfully before expiring like lost souls, as though heart-broken at the tortured scene.

Thou shalt fear  
Waking and sleeping mourne upon thy bed;  
And say at night, 'Would God the day were here',  
And say at dawn, 'Would God the day were dead'.

He has gone too far now to think of stopping and all his wretched up bitterness is poured out in the next passage:

"Go further than this. Think of the effect on a man of seeing friends, fellows whom he has learnt to love during the sharing of unspeakable experiences, following each other post-haste into screaming death, while he himself must go marching on, watching the world becoming a vast Necropolis, keeping his head the while, leading his men, enheartening them, planning his defences and waiting, waiting, waiting for the day when he, too, will be a stinking corpse, grinning at the moon."

over/.....



"Yes do not be refined and forget the stink. I think that even modern warfare could be endurable were it fought out with the breath of the woodlands in one's nostrils. But one does not scent the woodlands, or any of the dear perfumes of Nature: one smells nothing save the sickly-sweet miasma of death, that follows one everywhere, creeps into one's food, and wraps around one like a fog, tenacious and unconquerable, until one is full of whisky, and can say: 'Well hang it all, it is the stench of war, and war is not a rose-garden. I am not going to bring a weak stomach to bear on this business, for all the odours of corruption in Hell.' "

His summing up of the character of Stanhope finally establishes them as one and the same:

"A very gallant gentleman, Stanhope gives his life to the Company. He is a natural leader, a man of intellect and imagination who has only to beckon an order for his fellows to leap blindly into the most appalling hells...Leadership for him is an art, a creative art. He uses men as his materials; gives them force and cohesion, and harmony; weaves them into a splendid fighting unit; infuses into their souls a capacity for heroism that they themselves would have thought altogether beyond their powers to reach. He is an artist of genius in the dread school of war, and like all artists, all genuine artists, he will sacrifice the universe for his art. Such a man is charged with immense qualities of vital energy, but immense, too, is his expenditure, and in three years he is bankrupt of all ordinary reserves. Now, if he wished, could he legitimately retire to a cushy job in England. But his will has outlasted his nerves; the thought of caving in is intolerable and as the weeks and months of war toil their way to eternity he just goes marching on and on, this time with whisky keeping step by step. A man almost militantly moral by nature he watches with alarm what he conceives to be the deterioration of his character, but there is no respite to be called, for the war will not mark time while he goes to seek a cure."

A.K. Chesterton M.C., would also fit much of this description.

His wife recalled that:<sup>68</sup>

"K. always said modestly that what he did to earn (his M.C.) was only noticed because capturing the German trench.... happened to coincide with with what turned out to be our push for victory. But Colonel Walsh, the Colonel in charge, told me that K. was hand picked for the job because he was the bravest lieutenant available. This was backed up by some other important soul....who said, 'Chesterton? the bravest soldier in the army and the most undisciplined'. Unfortunately he did not enlarge upon his remark...I have it from Colonel Walsh that K. was extremely well liked and popular with the men. His gifts for leadership were stretched to capacity at this time and he was more than equal to the occasion."

The incident which led to his gaining the Military Cross occurred on September 18th 1918. As a Company commander he led an assault on the infamous Hindenburg line at Epehy. The attack took place along a German zig-zag trench and involved hand to hand fighting after throwing bombs into the next portion of the zig or zag. The main part of the battle lasted for seven hours without rest, and Chesterton was continuously involved in the operation for 48 hours. The citation told of his exemplary courage and of his fine leadership.<sup>69</sup>

Chesterton's memories of the affair centred on the fact that, after taking the trench, he experienced the horror of returning personally to inform his commanding officer of the victory and in so doing being forced to reach his objective scarcely touching the ground because of a vast carpet of German and British bodies killed in the action.<sup>70</sup> He was unable to remove this gruesome image from his mind for some time afterwards: "For years after the first war it had been my recurring nightmare to walk over a carpet of dead bodies stretching to infinity."<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, Chesterton was to be one of those men who were to wrestle with a life-long imaginative obsession with the war. But he seldom referred in the first person to his experiences. He was always at his best when, as in the review of Journey's End, dealing with it in the third person. Perhaps this was because he could display more righteous anger when dealing with the issue at one remove. Or it may have been that he did not wish to seem immodest by placing himself at the centre of such heroic actions. But, whatever the reason, this was the method usually adopted by him when dealing with his war experiences.

This was exactly the case in another significant article which traces his involvement in an attack during 1918. It was, in fact, written as a piece of B.U.F. propaganda, but it remains a classic piece of autobiography. It is a fascinating document and begins with the midnight briefing of Company commanders, one of whom (although unnamed) is certainly Chesterton. This becomes apparent when the officer is faced with a raw new subaltern named West, who expresses his desire to get straight into the thick of the fighting. The response of the unnamed officer is very illuminating:<sup>72</sup>

"I know how you feel' said the company commander gazing at his latest acquisition. He put West's age at 19, which happened to be his own. But then he had got caught up in the war three years earlier. He had trailed a rifle and one hundred and eighty rounds of ammunition through streaming jungles. He had shaken with malaria in the midst of unspeakable swamps. He had agonized for water in the desert wastes. And he had experienced enough of the game as it was played on the Western Front.

'I used to feel the same way', he went on. 'But now I have learnt to contain myself'."

Prior to the actual attack the company commander and his men are united in trust and assured comradeship. Then the order is given and they go over the top:

"Three hours later he made his way back to the Yellow Line, torn, dishevelled, inexpressibly weary-eyed. 'Glad to see you' said the Colonel. 'The only one of the four (Company commanders), Desborough, Harding, Snell - all gone. And most of their officers. Hello, wounded?' 'Not my blood sir. West's. Jerry stick bomb blew his brains all over me. No, no breakfast thanks. Only coffee.'....."\*

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\*Letter from Chesterton to Harry Crossley, 11 Heronwater, Clifton, Cape Town, South Africa. 23rd May, 1967: "I have fought with my fellow Britons in two world wars and know their quality. Their blood often enough has gushed over me and the brains of my best friend were blown into my face." Candour Collection, Uncatalogued.

But for Chesterton the real impact of the war came not simply from the experience itself, but from the way the aftermath of the war failed to live up to his expectations for it. Thus, for him, as he put it himself; "The most damnable tragedies of the war were the tragedies of war's aftermath."<sup>73</sup> And in 1930 he wrote that:<sup>74</sup>

"Those men who sentimentalized the war and wreathed their adult personalities out of the war experience, by this time have learnt to remember their appropriate memories rather than the stark actualities upon which they are based and so they are no closer to the truth than those of us who leapt from war to peace as to a conquest, looking back across the threshold but rarely and with increasing reluctance and horror, not because of the original memory, but because of what began to intervene to make that memory a mockery."

Thus Chesterton, with his long legacy of patriotism, simply refused to blame the futile nature of the war itself for the social and economic misery that followed its conclusion. Reading Chesterton's memories of the war it is difficult to imagine that he was a child of sixteen when he entered the carnage. His vision of all that was good in Britain and the Empire before 1914 is put forward with the certainty of one who actually experienced these conditions as an adult. Naturally enough he never stopped to think that this "hindsight" was idealistic in the extreme, conjured up from a middle class colonial childhood spent largely in South Africa and reinforced by a public school education in rural England. Likewise he was blind to the fact that because his vision of collective national social cooperation was born in the highly unusual circumstances of trench warfare, it was bound to be frustrated in a post war world dominated by market capitalism. As a result he began a search in order to find a social and political philosophy which could explain, at least to his own satisfaction, the reasons for the gap between actual

peacetime conditions and those which he felt should have crystallized into being in the aftermath of so devastating war.

For men like Chesterton the war was to create a new ideology of patriotism. As Robert Graves observed:<sup>75</sup>

"Patriotism in the trenches, was too remote a sentiment and at once rejected as fit only for civilians and prisoners. A new arrival who talked patriotism would be cut out....Britain was a quiet easy place for getting back to out of the present foreign misery; but as a nation it included not only the trench-soldiers themselves and those who had gone home wounded, but the Staff, Army Service Corps, lines of communications troops, base units, home service units and all the civilians down to the detested grades of journalists, profiteers, 'starred' men exempted from enlistment, conscientious objectors, and members of the Government."

Implicit in this account is the converse positive vision of the field troops themselves, from which Chesterton extracted his own ideal of the "true" British nation held, so to speak, in limbo on the fields of Northern France:<sup>76a</sup>

"We thought of the glorious unity of purpose which inspired and animated our hearts: of the unconquerable loyalty which exalted us; of the sweet comradeship of men who were all 'in the same boat', and who showed under duress a hundred and one endearing qualities which seemed unable to breathe beneath the stifling pettiness of peace; of the golden dreams, born of those friendships, wherein we saw Democracy, purged of its mortal grossness, marching forward to inhabit a new world as soon as the last shot had been fired and we returned to taste the fruits of victory."

He wrote this in 1928 and shortly afterwards observed that during the war "England was immeasurably greater than the screaming cant which went up from its shores", for "no country unsound to the core could maintain (such) magnificent armies in the field."<sup>76b</sup> In short, he had discovered to his own satisfaction what amounted to the core of a new Patria in the social relations of war.

In order to underline the difference between this new patriotism and the old visions of social imperialism and sentimentalism, it is only necessary to quote the following section from Chesterton's review of the film All Quiet on the Western Front. He begins with the quotation from Horace familiar to all pre-war public schoolboys:

"...'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.'<sup>77</sup>

Remarque's relentless book wipes the floor with this precious archaic sentiment and with all its offshoots no matter in what language they may be dressed...(After this) even the most strenuous advocate of the 'dulce et decorum' attitude ought to realize that those who laid down their lives did so, not with the large utterances of patriotic poetry on their lips, but with terror in every limb, and with what remained of their consciousness given up to an indescribably piteous prayer for life....It is as well that such exquisite 'sentiments' should be shown up in their true colours, since no doubt it was through their agency that smug religiosity sought to comfort itself for that most shocking Slaughter of Youth, and seeks to do so still in retrospect."

Seigfried Sassoon wrote that men who really endured the war at its worst, were everlastingly differentiated from everyone except their fellow soldiers.<sup>78</sup> Chesterton was a classic example of this phenomenon. Travelling on a train through the former battlefields on his way home in 1919:"I felt that for the rest of my life I would always be out there in the darkness knowing no friends but these friends, seeking no spheres of activity beyond these spheres, admitting no music save the music of feet tramping through the night.<sup>79</sup> Thus began my Odyssey." The 'Odyssey' was to end with his adoption of a Fascist creed which offered the chance to reunite the soldier and the civilian in one citizen in order to achieve a political state based on "spiritual values". Another chance for men to display their superhuman qualities of self-sacrifice - to reveal the "God in man".<sup>80</sup> For Chesterton believed that on the battlefield men had lived on the "heroic plane" and that they would do so again

when they realized the degree of their betrayal by post-war politicians who had turned the world sour and petty with materialism and greed:<sup>81</sup>

"I believe we would rather die than admit that we were wrong about the race of men. How could we be wrong? Those runners of mine were not isolated runners, paragons! Young W. . . who leapt upon death as though it were a rugger ball was not the only Subaltern in His Majesty's Forces to find an early grave. There were hundreds of such men in my experience: altogether they numbered millions.

Yet the glory is departed. The cohesive purpose has faded and men have become dissolved into so many myriad atoms of muddled pomposity and lumps of 'self'....This is no pessimism. The orators of Armistice are the pessimists, for they hold that all is well when all is rotten at the core.

We are optimists, affirming that the heroic plane is not set too high for members of that race of men who walked so quietly unto death, and believing that the spirit of man may still recuperate once it has faced the naked truth."

Thus it was Chesterton's idealistic nationalism and patriotism, combined with his model of 'war socialism', which set him apart from the majority of his ex-comrades, whom he saw as reduced to "lumps of self" in their rush to get back to normality. By the time he came to write the review of Journey's End, in 1928, it had become clear to him that this vision, which had inspired him to leap from war to peace "as to a conquest", was shared by only a tiny fraction of the men who had participated in the fighting. For he ended his review of the play with the following suggestion:<sup>82</sup>

"Perhaps one day Mr. R.C. Sherriff will go further and write a play wherein some fine Stanhope of a fellow will not meet journey's end, but will bring back with him to ordinary life a mind attuned to vast tumultuous happenings. There will be as great a tragedy in that play as in 'Journey's End'.."

Indeed there would, and while Sherriff never heeded Chesterton's suggestion, exactly such a story is about to unfold in this thesis, and about the very man Chesterton surely had in mind when he wrote these lines - himself.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ALMOST THE FREEMEN OF TWO WORLDS

The most damnable tragedies of the war were the tragedies of war's aftermath.

A.K. Chesterton, Review of Journey's End.

Some there were, as some there were among the Grecian Host, who reached home with the crossing of the Channel...The rest of us have wandered over strange seas and savoured life in strange zones of emotional experience, striving always to adjust ourselves to anti-climax, and passing through phases of pessimism blacker than the face of doom in our search for the temperate zone wherein life once again shall be charged with purpose and poise."

A.K. Chesterton, "Armistice - And A Thirteen Year Odyssey."



The war over, Chesterton remained in the army of occupation stationed in the Rhineland. Then, early in 1919, he returned to London to await his repatriation to South Africa. He stayed yet again with his paternal grandparents in Herne Hill. Things did not go very well here. He was already estranged from his relations because of their failure to show any real understanding of his situation when he had visited them during the war whilst on leave from the Front. Now they compounded the error by expressing the desire for a quick return to 'normality' now the war was over. As a result he remembered the period with some bitterness in later years. In one particularly trying incident he recalled being "dragged, bored almost beyond endurance, to see where a bomb had dropped in a neighbouring park and to listen to a dissertation on the privations suffered by the civilian population."<sup>1</sup> Social divisions soon reared their ugly head when he was reprimanded for daring to renew the acquaintance of a comrade who had served as a mere private. Worse still, a servant girl was dismissed from the household simply because he had shown a mild interest in her good looks, (in case a liaison should develop). He, in turn, spurned the advice of a stockbroker friend of the family who suggested that he should settle down and "make some money", and that of a soldier chaplain brought in to suggest that it was the soldier's duty to help guide the country back into its old ways. Finally there was the judgement of the girl "with the half-serious, half mischievous face", who, in reply to his proposal of marriage, said: "No, frankly I am terrified. You are like a volcano about to erupt, and both our lives are liable to be burnt out."<sup>2</sup>

In many ways this was an apt description of Chesterton's demeanour

during this period. For here was an increasingly disillusioned young man, on the rebound from war, faced with a total lack of comprehension (even among well intentioned people) for what he and the whole army had daily endured in France. This led to a crushing sense of betrayal on his part, which he expressed very clearly in a piece written several years later:<sup>3</sup>

"Our first discoveries were none the less disconcerting because they were inevitable. To our overheated consciousness it really did seem monstrous when we found that a wet day was still a matter of suburban complaint, and a desecration of the spirit of man when we discovered that a butcher's mistake or a grocer's carelessness still had the power to upset the tempers of a household. That anybody should ever dare to be petty again stirred our resentment, and that those petty people should once again imagine that they could impose their petty house-rules upon us, who were almost the freemen of two worlds, turned our resentment into fury, irrational of course. We were a little beyond ourselves, and no wonder...I remember how one day, not long after the war, I became wearied of London and sought escape on a Surrey hillside...Opposite me in the distance was another hill, well wooded. 'Make a fine gun position!' I told myself, and waited all day for the tell-tale flash from the wood. That no flash should have come maddened me and I hurried back to town in a kind of spiritual panic. The same evening I seized hold of myself and eventually sat up all night in an attempt to clarify my mind by writing an article entitled 'Aftermath', in which I came to grips with the malady afflicting me...which bears no name, but which is engendered when the human mind toned up to deal with the exalted occasion is confronted with the squat, derisive features of bathos."

While there can be no doubt that many articulate survivors of the war suffered this kind of culture shock in a civilian world stripped of comradeship and military purpose, few were doomed, as was Chesterton, to weave their future destiny around a search for the implications of the war - both personal and for mankind in general. For Chesterton the sense that he had a responsibility to bear witness to the dead of the battlefield, and to keep alive their memory, grew as the years passed. He could not bring himself to admit that the combatants' agony and exaltation had been in vain. He was convinced that they had passed through a rite of purification which had left the survivors

new and better men. Stripped of their egotism and aware of the nation as a clearly defined entity, they were ready to face the task of rebuilding Britain and her Empire. To him the trenches had provided a metaphor and model of social existence with universal applicability.

But, almost immediately, he was confronted with the reality of post-war England and it rapidly became apparent to him that the nation was more interested in returning to the comfortable ways of the pre-war world, than in any moral crusade on behalf of national regeneration. In reaction to this his initial incomprehension turned to despair and then to anger:<sup>4</sup>

"Time's irony...is much more real than the war itself. How proudly we promised ourselves eternal remembrance of our pity and of our terror! And how content we are to have both our pity and our terror conventionalised as stereotyped war-portraits, as Time, another dimension of Space, puts between our focus of memory and the memory itself that desolating panorama which is the spectacle of post-war England."

"the soaring faiths and heroisms of the war were interred with the corpses on the battlefield, and the civilian world settled down smugly to forget all of them...It was as if the war had never been. The old pettiness returned in shoals. Jealousies flew back with sickening shrieks...Advertisement and pretence counted for everything, manhood for very little. In the war a man's soul was stripped naked; he could not for the life of him disguise a yellow streak. In post-war England, however, a yellow streak could be wrapped up in a coat of many gorgeous colours, and cads and cowards masqueraded as the salt of the earth. The surviving Stanhopes came home to contemplate this strange mockery, and the sight did not help them in the task of transition which each and every one of them had to undertake or go under. Some did go under, lost in the hell-fires of an inevitable reaction; others struggled painfully with their souls through long years of suffering and at long last emerged with colours flying - owing nothing in gratitude to the world about them, which looked upon them with taunts and jeers and ill reports, caring nought that these were the men who faced the legions of hell for the sake of its own miserable security. The most damnable tragedies of the war were the tragedies of war's aftermath, which make the soul sick with the thought of them."

For Chesterton the task of transition began in earnest in South Africa where he returned in April 1920, shortly before his twenty-first birthday. The circumstances surrounding his arrival were less than happy. To his considerable surprise the Johannesburg Star made a special announcement of his return which, in turn, led to his being invited to dine with a wealthy and socially eminent family. He arrived to find a distinguished gathering waiting for his appearance. An indiscreet guest soon revealed to him that they were all expecting to meet the Mr. Chesterton. As Chesterton remarked: "Alas! I was too young to derive sardonic amusement from the situation. My confusion and misery were complete."<sup>5</sup>

This problem of mistaken identity was to dog Chesterton for most of his adult life. Summing up his feelings on the matter he wrote that:<sup>6</sup>

"The shadow cast by Gilbert Keith Chesterton was in every sense of the word, enormous. Having lived under it all my life I can claim to be an authority on the subject...Were there compensations for having to abide in this tremendous shadow? I cannot think of one."

Chesterton had few meetings with his illustrious cousin and while acknowledging an admiration for his ideas (he was more interested in Cecil Chesterton's political beliefs as we shall see later)<sup>7</sup> he did not attempt to capitalize on his family name to further his own career.\*

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\*In his book on race relations in Britain, Mr. Sidney Bidwell suggests that Chesterton only came to public notice because of his having "tirelessly pointed out that he was a cousin of...G.K. Chesterton." In doing so Mr. Bidwell makes the elementary mistake of confusing the sometimes crude nature of Chesterton's racial nationalist propaganda with the calibre of the man behind it. He also seems to assume mendacity to be the motive behind such writings. Little evidence exists to support such a point of view. As we shall see Chesterton was a first-rate journalist who had the potential to have become a leading newspaper drama critic if he had so desired. Mr. Bidwell's hasty conclusions should prove

Having recovered from his coming of age celebrations, Chesterton demonstrated his dissatisfaction with the humdrum existence of civilian life in Johannesburg by making an immediate bid for his fortune as a diamond prospector. In a remote part of Bechuanaland there had been a discovery of diamonds which was followed by a diamond rush led by mainly Irish prospectors who had gathered great riches for themselves. They named their find Killarney and this was succeeded by another Irish success four miles away which was immediately given the provocative name of Home Rule. This was sufficient for the local government to assume that a rich diamondiferous region must exist in the area and it was announced that the area, known as Tlaping, would be opened up to prospectors on a given date. Chesterton was one of those drawn to this remote place in 1920 in the hope of making a fortune.

Taking the train to Kimberley he reached Tlaping by various means and nearing the area he came upon his fellow prospectors for the first time:<sup>8</sup>

"After crossing vast tracts of empty veld I began to see hundreds of people converging on the place, some being bumped in cars along almost non-existent roads, the most travelling by ox-waggons which carried entire Boer families anxious to try their luck. So confident were some Rand millionaires that Tlaping was unbelievably rich that they even hired professional runners to participate in the rush and peg claims in the likeliest spots.

A starting line was drawn up, and on the day of the proclamation at least a thousand of us were marshalled behind it by mounted police. We had all equipped ourselves with a wooden mallet and four pegs. An official proclaimed the diggings open, a police officer fired his revolver in the air and the rush was on. And a very wild rush it was, with much rough jostling until we began to spread out all over the veld.."

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a warning to those who seek to find the irrational roots of fascism and racial nationalism in the 'second rate' intellectual stature and moral fibre of all those who accept such ideologies. Cf. Sidney Bidwell, Red, White and Black: Race Relations in Britain, Gordon and Cremonesi, London, 1976, p91.

Choosing a suitable spot (he had absolutely no idea what to look for) he staked out his claim with the four stakes and stood in the centre with his mallet raised to protect it against any overenthusiastic latecomers. Then he proceeded to the Government tent to register his claim. Work began immediately. He hired a gang of eight Bechuana and they began removing the eight feet of overburden while he set about negotiating the hire of a "Baby" - a machine capable of sifting the diamondiferous gravel supposed to be beneath the surface. Once a week he hired a "washing machine", with which to wash the accumulated gravel which had already been sifted into likely lumps. All this apparatus and labour proved expensive to hire and the problem was made worse by the local racketeers who charged half-a-crown a bucket for water brought from the nearest river which happened to be two miles away. The Boer families fared better with large numbers of children and a strict division of labour amongst the members of the family. They also had oxen to fetch the water and so escaped this cost completely. Chesterton's meagre capital (his 'war bonus') dwindled rapidly and he was soon forced to give up. In fact the whole ramshackled town began to dismantle itself and move back from whence its various members had come. What was most discouraging was the fact that the professional diggers led the retreat. Tlaping was a failure and Chesterton had only sufficient money to pay off his labourers and to return to Johannesburg with five pounds to his name.<sup>9</sup>

His next move was to contact one of his mother's relations who managed a mine at Mariasburg on the West Rand. His uncle offered him the job of superintending the black gang which operated the crushing station at the mine. He accepted and began

work immediately. The gangers, as he readily admitted, were skilled in their jobs and the white miner was merely expected to maintain and mend the equipment when required. Here Chesterton was even more helpless and a breakdown would have left him with no alternative but to seek advice elsewhere. Fortunately the occasion never arose as he was forced to give up the job only a month after starting.<sup>10</sup>

He was instructed to attend the statutory Pthisis Board of medical examination in Johannesburg. His job entailed the breathing of silocutic dust and for this he required (as a white miner) a certificate of fitness to withstand such conditions. After examination by three doctors he was taken aside by one and informed that they would refuse him a licence. It transpired that his only noticeable physical infirmity lay in his being slightly under weight. The doctors, however, had decided that he was "far too good" for underground work.<sup>11</sup> In fact, even on medical grounds this was probably very sound advice, as in 1918 Chesterton had inhaled phosgene gas on the battlefield and was racked with coughing for forty-eight hours afterwards. The emphysema which made the last twenty years of his life a physical misery probably originated from this gas attack and if he had made a career in the mines this acute and chronic respiratory disease would almost certainly have shortened his life - perhaps even by decades. His stepfather was a classic example of a man killed by the mining related lung disease Pthisis while still in the prime of life. At the time, however, Chesterton remembered thinking only of the sixty pounds a month he was earning and pondering on "how the well meaning doctors would define 'goodness'."<sup>12</sup>

The doctors' decision proved momentous for Chesterton. By cutting him off from lucrative employment in the mining industry it hastened his move into journalism. During his brief period at the mine in Mariasburg he had written and sent off several light-hearted letters and an article on the vagaries of being a diamond prospector at Tlaping. To his surprise and delight all had duly appeared in print in the Johannesburg Star, his chosen vehicle of expression. Now, faced with the prospect of unemployment or worse, living with his widowed mother and step sister on the chicken farm in the Sunday River Valley, he decided to write to the editor of the Star asking for a job.

His audacity payed off. He was invited to an interview with "Barty" Thwaites, the Star's News Editor:<sup>13</sup>

"He took me along to the editor C.D. Don, which was no more than a formality. Don, a first class leader writer, concentrated on that side of the work and took no interest in the running of the paper. Then I was conducted to John Martin, the General Manager. This was the man that counted. Of immense ability, he directed the Star down to the smallest detail before moving on to be Big Noise of the powerful Corner House group of mining companies and eventually to become a director of the Bank of England."

Chesterton was informed by Thwaites that he would be employed on a probationary basis as a junior reporter. At first sight this may seem strange - that one of South Africa's leading newspapers should have been prepared to take on a man whose education had been so disjointed. But in fact it is a comment on the very nature of professional journalism which demands a very special kind of personality and provides its own 'in house' education for those with a natural ability to express themselves in print. In Chesterton's case the fit between his temperament and abilities, and the requirements of the job were almost perfect. His wife has



perhaps best expressed the strange mixture of order and chaos that characterized her husband's intellectual abilities:<sup>14</sup>

"Wherever he went [as a child] it was acknowledged that he expressed himself well. He wrote as the birdies sing, naturally. He could write in a sympathetic atmosphere, speak fluently and he had a great sense of fun. But when he was bad he was very bad. He was hopeless at 'drawing' as it was called in those days and could never sing in tune. His sense of rhythm was so poor that he could never dance. But he was apt at learning by heart and in later life could quote Shakespeare accurately without reference to the script. He read widely and when quite young wrote an amusing play which shows he had an intelligent grasp of Greek mythology. He learnt poetry very easily and when he was interested the poems stuck in his mind for keeps. This was, I think, in spite of rather than because of his schooling. All his life he was shockingly untidy - losing papers and personal belongings and money. But there was a very tidy core to his mind. Information once grasped was there for life. In speech writing he could recall a quotation or a set of figures or an argument and had no need to verify what he said or wrote. It was as if he lifted stored treasure from a tidily packed pile and could without hesitation put his hands on exactly what he wanted. Yet keeping his papers together was the despair of his secretary, and keeping his undies etc. in any order was the despair of his wife."

In addition his style of writing was both forceful and, where necessary, deeply ironical or downright humorous - vital assets for a newspaper man (and later a political propagandist). He was also a good sub-editor and editor and possessed that most indispensable attribute of the good journalist - news sense. The term is not easily translated into laymans' terms but basically it means being in the right place at the right time and recognizing this to be the case, both for oneself and if in a position of editorial control, for others.\*

During his first few months with the paper he came to prefer

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\*As Doris Chesterton correctly remarks this was not the kind of approach characteristic of an academic: "Kenneth's critical style of writing was characterised by a propensity to use a hammer to crack a nut - his response was often exaggerated when on the attack and there could be no excuses on the part of the accused." In short: "he could never have written history." Cf. Interview with Doris L. Chesterton, July 18th 1978, p2 of transcript.

digging into the Johannesburg underworld of petty crime for the more unusual stories outside the daily routine (hardly surprising for a young man who had lived most of his life outside the normal routine of existence). He became friendly with the city's C.I.D. men and was often invited to accompany them on night raids upon illegal Shebeens (drinking clubs), opium dens and brothels, in fact "every kind of illicit activity which might conceivably give me scope for a 'special'." <sup>15</sup>

But the most bizarre situation he was to find himself in was when he was sent to cover the political situation in Portuguese East Africa for the Star. While there he discovered that the local Portuguese High Command had succeeded in presiding over a situation in which two sections of the Portuguese army had had a brush with each other. Delighted at the prospect of another humorous 'special' he set to and drafted an article on the events. Alerted to this fact the local Portuguese governor immediately summoned Chesterton to his presence. Duly reporting with his local interpreter Chesterton was informed in no uncertain terms that his poking around was not welcome and that he should report the following morning to the local railway station to catch a train out of the region. He started to argue with the Administrator but was taken aside by his guide and informed that he had better comply with the deportation order, as this is what it was in effect.

The next morning he arrived at the station at the appointed hour to discover to his astonishment that a 'special' carriage had been attached to the train, containing his own personal 'guard' of Portuguese soldiers to escort him 'safely' over the border. Returning to his office in Johannesburg he completed the articles

and handed them on to the editor who read them with obvious enjoyment and then proceeded to tear them up and deposit them in his waste-paper basket. "Sorry but we can't print these old boy!" he exclaimed, "It would cause a diplomatic incident between South Africa and Portugal if we did!"<sup>16</sup>

Easily the most important story covered by Chesterton while he was with the Star was the so called "Red revolt" on the Witwatersrand in 1922. For this fracas brought him into direct confrontation with the full implications of Afrikaner nationalism, a force in South Africa which had always puzzled him as a child. The perplexity was to remain, but as an adult he was forced to take sides with a vengeance.

In Chapter 1 above the growth of Afrikaner nationalism was discussed in relation to the outrage felt over the employment of indentured Chinese labour in the mines and the lowering of the skilled colour bar against black labourers. White trade unions, in alliance with nationalist political parties, combined to defeat the plans for such labour dilution by the British authorities and the large scale mine owners. Since then the outbreak of the First World War had caused disunity in the white South African ranks. The Unionist Party demonstrated typical jingoistic pro-British Empire sentiments and attracted the support of many British and English speaking whites during this period. Meanwhile some of the Boer generals instigated an armed revolt against the government for bringing South Africa into the war on the side of the British. Nevertheless solidarity in defence of the employment colour-bar remained strong and in 1914, during the general strike of white workers, the Labour Movement gained a para-military wing - the worker's commandos. During this period

large numbers of rural Afrikaners (many of whom were former Boer War veterans) were driven into the ranks of the mine labour force. They joined the white unions and faced with the threat to their new jobs from black labour dilution they brought to the movement the military tactics which had proved so effective in past struggles. This trend was reinforced by Smuts' heavy handed dealings with the strikers in the 1914 strike. He posted several thousand troops and police in Johannesburg and called out the rural Afrikaner burgher citizens' defence forces who were, of course, also organized on commando lines. Under such open provocation the Republican commandos became an accepted wing of the labour movement. Not only did they form a protective force against possible government attack, they also provided an internal police force to combat the use of non-union labour and to keep black labour away from the mines.

In the post war depression in South Africa the price of gold and coal fell steeply and during the war years the mine owners had taken the opportunity to bring in large numbers of low paid black labourers while the white miners were away fighting in the war. Now, faced with falling prices and rising costs as the mines plunged ever deeper into the Platteland, the owners were anxious to maintain the trend towards lower labour costs through the introduction of black labour. In total opposition to this the white unions were demanding a return to the earlier Status Quo Agreement (an extension of pre-war legislation that had been used against the entry of Chinese labour into semi-skilled jobs, which contained a rigid colour-bar.) The acute depression made the workers especially fearful for their jobs and therefore extremely militant. Many of the Afrikaners (now four-fifths of

the white mine labour force) had recently experienced the trauma of leaving the land as destitute 'poor whites' and had no wish to face unemployment again.

After a long period of negotiation and a consequent build up of ill feeling on both sides, a major strike began in the coal industry. Faced with new lower prices for coal in Britain the owners demanded wage reductions averaging 5 shillings per day. Outraged union officials demanded arbitration. This was refused. A strike ballot was held and out of the 24,000 workers eligible to vote, nearly 14,000 voted to strike with only 1,336 against.<sup>17</sup> The coal miners came out on January 2nd 1922 and the engineers, gold miners and power workers on the 10th. At the heart of this bitter dispute lay the issue of a plan to extend the use of black labour in the mines. On this issue the Afrikaner Nationalist Party and the predikants of Boer society offered their support from the very beginning.<sup>18</sup> This is a clue to the real nature and long term significance of the 1922 revolt. In the final analysis it must be viewed as a Nationalist rather than a class revolt. As Norman Herd has so cogently expressed it:<sup>19</sup>

"viewed in perspective, it was an unheroic defeat for Labour's basic principles. Right there in the huddle of tatty buildings in Fordesburg; across the slopes of Brixton Ridge; in the streets of Johannesburg and the East Rand towns, labour surrendered itself to the onswEEP of a political force more powerful and much less spiritually divided than itself."

Ultimately this force was to become full blown Afrikaner nationalism, which, by the General Election of 1924, was sufficiently powerful to gain overall control of the Government.

From the outset the strikers' commandos took the initiative away from the trade union leaders. They were never really under the control of the Trade Union Council of Action and represented

an ambiguous force based upon a common class, race and nationalist ideology. But by far the least important of these themes was that of class. First and foremost they were white Afrikaner republicans, fighting against the Smuts' government, its pro-capitalist and (more importantly) pro-black and pro-British Empire policies.

To append the epithet "Red" to the strike, therefore, is to perpetuate a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation. It has been clearly demonstrated that the Communist Party of South Africa (C.P.S.A.) was frustrated in all its efforts to control the strike.<sup>20</sup> Recognizing that it was largely fuelled by racial chauvinism they reasoned that the strike would nonetheless develop the worker's class consciousness. In believing this they not only ignored the nationalist dimension of the conflict, but also the fact that the white miners were both wage earners and sub-contractors - exploiters as well as exploited, under the white supervisor system. Slogans such as the following, put out by the C.P.S.A, were lost on the strikers: "Wages then, not colour, is the point to strike about and so far as this is a strike to maintain wages, it deserves the whole-hearted support of all labour, including the coloured and native workers themselves."<sup>21</sup> The often violent attacks upon blacks by the strikers provoked a further plea by the C.P.S.A. in a handbill: "LEAVE THE KAFFIR ALONE, WHITE WORKERS, HANDS OFF BLACK WORKERS!"<sup>22</sup> Their task was hopeless from the start and their influence over the course of events similarly restricted.

Only those Socialists willing to support the thoroughly ambiguous slogan of "Workers of the World Unite and Fight For A White South Africa," could hope to be at all influential in this dispute. Yet even they lost control of the commandos and were

eventually forced to disassociate themselves from the overt Republican call to arms against Smuts' declaration of martial law. This led to the bloody end of the strike with the commandos engaged in a series of skirmishes and 'last-stands' as the police and armed forces closed in on the strike headquarters in the Johannesburg suburb of Fordesburg.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, given its right wing racial chauvinism, the propaganda of the combined anti-Government forces during this period, contained an element of pro-Bolshevik sympathy. This stemmed from the pact between the Nationalist and Labour parties to oppose British Imperialism in South Africa. On the one hand the Nationalists were vaguely anti-Capitalist (and anti-Semitic) associating British Imperialism with large scale capitalism and entrenched interests. On the other the Labour Party could always match the Nationalists in its determination to preserve the colour-bar, as it drew much of its working class support from those who stood to gain most from such inequality. Smuts' own South Africa Party was tainted as the party of Imperialism and capitalism and in their combined efforts to win the propaganda battle during the strike and (with one eye on the coming election in 1924) both opposition parties joined in disseminating pro-Bolshevik ideas. The 1917 revolution in Russia was still popular with workers all over the world, though Afrikaner support was limited to drawing out its ethos of national self-determination - socialism in one country, free from Imperialism and international capitalism.

With this proviso Bolshevism was a handy weapon to attack both the British and the Smuts' government. So it was that Hertzog, addressing the National Party Congress in 1919, was moved to

remark that:<sup>24</sup>

"Bolshevism is the will of the people to be free...why do people want to oppress and kill Bolshevism? Because national freedom means death to Capitalism and Imperialism. Don't let us be afraid of Bolshevism. The idea itself is excellent".

Dr. Malan of the Nationalist Party, speaking to a gathering at Vryburg on 23rd January 1923, proclaimed that:<sup>25</sup>

"The aim of the Bolsheviks was that Russia should manage her own affairs without interference from outside. That was the same policy that the Nationalists would follow in South Africa. The Bolsheviks stand for freedom, just like the Nationalist Party."\*

During the strike the Nationalist M.P. Tielman Roos and the Labour Party M.P. Bob Waterson stood on the same platform as the strike leaders and mouthed the ambiguous slogans of White supremacy. But when the actual fighting began in earnest against the 20,000 troops, police and loyalist commandos, the Nationalist leaders refused their open support and the Labour leadership often lent theirs only half-heartedly. Neither wanted to become too involved in armed insurrection against the state as they were confident of taking power at the next general election due mainly to the massive unpopularity of the Smuts government.

As Norman Herd has pointed out:"For many thousands of South Africans, Englishmen and Afrikaners, strikers and non-strikers, Smuts was the wily and dangerous servant of capitalist oppression."<sup>26</sup> At the very outset of the revolt Tielman Roos addressed a strike meeting in the following terms:"Your best strike weapon is the General Election. At the next one you will sweep the Smuts

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\*W.A. de Klerk has made the following interesting observation on this phenomenon:"It was, in fact, an early expression of what would become commonplace in the Third World, nationalist thought aligning itself with Marxist theory." The Puritans in Africa, Pelican Books, London, 1976, pp104-5.



government from power."<sup>27</sup> These were indeed prophetic words. The Afrikaner miners who now formed the bulk of the growing proletariat expressed their disgust with Smuts by voting for the Nationalist-Labour coalition almost to a man. In the election the Nationalists took 63 seats, gaining 18, Labour took 18, gaining 9 and Smuts' South African Party managed only 52.<sup>28</sup> It is significant that the United Front under Hertzog included both the Labour and Communist parties, for this victory in 1924 was to mark the decisive watershed in South African politics, from which would emerge the South African Republic with its apartheid policies and rabid anti-Communism - in short, the very negation of any kind of Socialism, let alone Marxism. Thus, as Herd has suggested, while the 1922 revolt was widely termed "Red" at the time, it is much more correct to view it as a purely nationalist phenomenon.<sup>29</sup>

Caught up in the actual events such detachment could hardly be expected from Chesterton. As far as he was concerned it was indeed a Red revolt. At first his sympathies were with the strikers: "It was a very proper step to take, since white standards in Africa must be safeguarded...Had it remained a strike and resulted in a triumph I should have been the last to write a complaint." It was the escalation of the strike into an armed confrontation with the state that alienated him from the strikers, for in this he thought he detected the work of Communist agitators. Besides, to have admitted that the propaganda used was simply tactical rhetoric to cover emerging Afrikaner Nationalism, would have been to take up arms against his fellow white supremacists - a most uncomfortable state of affairs.

His direct involvement in the events of 1922 began when he was detailed to cover the story of what proved to be the final week of the conflict. By this time he had already had some experience of the bitterness generated by the strike. The Star had come out on the side of the government from the beginning, viewing the whole thing as a communist inspired plot to take over the South African state. It was thus viewed by the strikers as the aggressive voice of the mining houses and was in constant danger of attack from strike commandos. Chesterton was detailed to lead the defence of the Star building which was sandbagged all round. He obtained arms and ammunition from the local Drill Hall and staff were encouraged to spend their nights at the office. Already Star reporters were being manhandled from strike meetings and then an incident occurred to one of Chesterton's friends. He was a mine official on the West Rand and was seized by strikers, taken into the veld, beaten up and then: "spread eagled while the debased women of his persecutors made water into tins and then poured the contents over his face."<sup>30</sup> Next Chesterton's uncle, Tommy Bruce, was wounded while attempting to protect his African mine workers in their compound.

Thus, by the time he was detailed to cover the story there can be little doubt as to where Chesterton's sympathies lay. He was helping to prepare a special Sunday edition of the Star when news reached the office that the military were preparing to attack the strike commandos holding Brixton Ridge, as a preliminary to the final assault on the strike H.Q. - the Fordesburg Trades Hall, situated at the centre of squalid Johannesburg suburbs. The Durban Light Infantry (D.L.I.) were assembling at Parktown for the march on Brixton Ridge and Chesterton was instructed to take

the office car and join them to report on the battle.

His arrival at the scene and the subsequent events would do justice to a John Buchan novel. Norman Herd, who interviewed Chesterton many years later for his book on the revolt, sets the scene perfectly:<sup>31</sup>

"Don Urquhart was acting news editor of The Star while Bartie Thwaites, one of the most distinguished newspapermen of his time, was away serving with the Imperial Light Horse. Urquhart detailed A.K. (Keith) [sic] Chesterton - he and Urquhart had been brother officers on the Western Front - to cover the assault on Brixton Ridge."

Arriving at the D.L.I. encampment Chesterton's car was stopped and he was hauled out by a group of soldiers:<sup>32</sup>

"Who was I? I was a reporter. What was I doing in an area taken over by the military? I had come to report what was happening - in particular the impending attack on Brixton Ridge. How did I know that Brixton Ridge was to be attacked? It was our job to find out these things. It's a spy's job to find out these things. Why not confess that you belong to the gang which attacked us last night? Somebody demanded to know: 'Is the bugger armed?' Before I could answer they frisked me and pulled out my revolver. That settled it they said. About twenty voices shouted: 'Shoot the bastard!' I was shoved up against a fence. 'Before you make absolute bloody fools of yourselves by committing murder', I said to the very excited sergeant in charge, 'would you please take me to your commanding officer.' This had a sobering effect."

He was taken to the commanding officer and his appearance there provoked an even more extraordinary outburst:<sup>33</sup>

"What are you bloody fools doing with Chesterton?' Asked the commanding officer of the Durban Light Infantry. It was the voice of Colonel Molyneaux, under whom I had served as a draft officer in the war...I explained my mission.

'This is a time for doing, not for reporting', said Colonel Molyneaux.

'I'm short of officers. Have you still got your uniform?'

'No', I replied, 'but if your chaps will release my driver I'll go back to town and see what I can do about getting one.' So it was agreed..."

Back in Johannesburg he and a friend broke into the store of the African Theatre Trust and stole a khaki drill uniform and pith helmet. His friend's wife then sewed on some medal ribbons and within the hour this unlikely soldier reported back for duty with

the D.L.I.. He was instructed to guide the troops to relieve some policemen who were under seige in the Newlands-Sophiatown area. Frightened by the battalion's full show of strength the rebels retreated from this and the Brixton Ridge stronghold, allowing the government troops an easy victory.<sup>34</sup>

A few days later Chesterton advanced with the D.L.I. for the final assault on the Trades Hall. Events moved rapidly to their climactic conclusion, with fierce fighting around the Hall. The strikers were secure in trenches on the two open sides of the building and defended the main road approaches from behind sandbagged defences. Chesterton, now in charge of No 13 Platoon, led his men through some rows of houses and gardens to reach a vantage point close to the trenches at the back of the building. There they discovered a bottle store into which they crept. Peeping through the drawn blinds of the store Chesterton saw before him the strikers firing from the trenches and the makeshift blockhouse (constructed from a public lavatory). Here was the perfect position to launch a surprise attack. He sent a message back to the machine gun officer who brought forward his weapon and installed it behind the blind. Placing four infantrymen on each side of the window Chesterton ripped open the blind and the gun commenced rapid firing at point blank range, taking the men in the trenches completely by surprise. Then, as was the habit of these old water-cooled weapons, the machine gun jammed, and was immediately removed to the rear lest it should fall into enemy hands.

Chesterton takes up the story:<sup>35</sup>

over/.....

"Noticing that the heads were still ducked, I and eight infantrymen fixed bayonets, removed what was left of the glass in the window, and we charged the Trades Hall. The men in the trenches and urinal surrendered at once and we then burst open the main door of the Trades Hall, having now been reinforced by the pro-Smuts burghers who had advanced on our right and one of the Rand Regiments which had advanced on our left. About 150 police officers who had been kept prisoner in a big room on the ground floor were released...In one room were the bodies of Spendiff and Fisher, leaders of the rebellion, slumped over the table and in front of them a document written somewhat dramatically in blood: 'We died by our own bullets, not of those bastards.'..."\*

The revolt was crushed and Smuts won the battle, but he had lost the war and was swept from power in 1924. In his autobiography Chesterton avows that the events had "the effect of unsettling me."<sup>36</sup> From the beginning his loyalties were divided between the economic motives of the strikers and the political requirement to protect the state against armed insurrection. In taking part on the side of government forces he had set himself to defend the rights of the mine owners to employ black labour; while in defending the British controlled South African state he was holding back Afrikaner nationalism which would eventually create a political system based on apartheid of which Chesterton would thoroughly approve. But it was not a South Africa sympathetic to British interests in the way he had longed to see. The British in South Africa were relegated to a relatively powerless minority in the new Republic. Much of this remained unclear in 1922, but the straws were already in the wind and must have contributed to Chesterton's unease at the time.

His solution to the problem at the time was to concentrate on the fact that the rebels had mouthed pro-bolshevik slogans and

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\*For an account of the conflicting stories on the exact nature of the deaths of Fisher and Spendiff, Cf., Norman Herd, 1922 The Revolt on the Rand, Johannesburg, 1966, pp159-160.

console himself that he had assisted in putting down a "Red" revolt against the state. This was a fiction he maintained throughout most of his life, claiming on the dust jacket of a book in 1965 that he had been instrumental in bringing to an end the "Red Revolt" on the Witwatersrand.<sup>37</sup>

But he was not always so unambiguous in his writings on the subject. More than a hint of his deeper perplexity can be seen in the following attack on Smuts:<sup>38</sup>

"You shot down hundreds of white men during the Red Revolt on the Witwatersrand. I do not suggest for a moment that you had any option, but merely mention these facts in relation to your noble insistence upon liberty...Do you remember, Oom Janie, that regulation secured by white trade unionism, whereby no native, no matter how skilled, might perform skilled jobs in the mines. You should remember, because it led to enough trouble and bloodshed. The time came when the bosses wished this regulation might be abolished in order that they might exploit cheap native labour to the disadvantage of white labour, and in pressing forward their claims created a general strike that turned into an armed revolt over the whole length of the Rand. On whose side were you, Slim Janie?"

Nor was he always willing to praise subsequent events in South Africa:<sup>39</sup>

"later came the Boer War, the shedding of brave British blood, and the subsequent virtual surrender of the whole of South Africa to the defeated Boers, without a single vital safeguard for the Britons who had made their homes there. They have been gradually ousted from important posts in the Civil Service and Defence Force, while anti-British propaganda is still being fostered in all the schools of the back-veld."

Both of these uncharacteristically honest accounts were provoked by his Fascist radicalism during the 1930s.

In the immediate aftermath of the events of 1922 there were other, more tangible, grievances to trouble Chesterton. These centred on what he saw as the mis-reporting of the part played by the D.L.I. in the affair. Chesterton himself did not file any copy on the events while he was on active service with the army and consequently played little part in the Star's account.

He was therefore most indignant to discover that in all the newspaper reports, the Official Report, written by General Beavis, and the booklet, written by Don Urquhart (based on the Official Report) the role of the D.L.I. had been written down "almost to that of camp followers."<sup>40\*</sup> His anger was probably greater because he was suffering from alcoholism in reaction to his war-time experiences and the arid intellectual climate of Johannesburg:<sup>41</sup>

"The Rand Revolt had the effect of unsettling me. It was not that it had inspired in me any desire for further military adventures. I had had enough fighting to last me a lifetime. But the break with routine compelled me to look afresh at the way I had been living. I liked travelling with the circuit courts in the Eastern Transvaal, because the cases I heard brought into the open many African customs and aspects of witchcraft hitherto unknown to me, and I enjoyed digging in and around the city itself for new material which I turned into special articles.

Johannesburg, however, was not the place - at any rate for one of my temperament - in which to live a happy life. Despite its underlying ferocity it was a very dull town, in which the pursuit of money was the main preoccupation, with the pursuit of alcohol a close second. The arts did not flourish and the love of poetry was regarded as a positive eccentricity. I wanted to live with aspiration but Johannesburg - the Johannesburg of those times - was no nursery-bed for aspirations. Whiskey filled the void."

His addiction took the form of periodic bouts of drinking during which he would drink himself almost senseless over a period of days, to be followed by days or weeks of less destructive

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\*Letter to Norman Herd, P.O. Box 8774, Johannesburg, S.A., 17th March 1965. "The official account of the revolt on which Urquhart based his book is totally misleading, as was the account last year in the Cape Argus, which affirmed that the D.L.I. played a subsidiary part and advanced from east to west instead of the other way around... If you care to look up the records of the Star you will find an astonishing thing. An incorrect account appears in every edition except in the Stop Press Final (as distinct from the Final) edition on the day Fordesburg was captured, or perhaps the following day. The Stop Press Final edition carried Keeley's report, written after he was sent out by Urquhart to get the an [sic.] authentic account from the D.L.I., alone is missing from the files as it is from the micro-film records of the Johannesburg Public Library." [Candour Collection/Uncatalogued.]

consumption.<sup>42</sup> One of these occasional bouts of heavy drinking followed his experiences of the strike. This, in turn, exacerbated a dispute with his employers at the Star ("over some issue which has completely faded from my memory")<sup>43</sup> and he tendered his resignation which was duly accepted. When the bout ended he found himself in one of the hardest cities in the world with very little in the way of money or property to his name. He later recalled that: "My relations on the Rand had been the first to point the finger of scorn and on no account would I seek a helping hand from them."<sup>44</sup>

In desperation he decided to seek work on a large project of public works set up by the Government to help solve the growing 'poor white' problem of the Witwatersrand - the building of the Hartebeeste Dam in the vicinity of Pretoria. He arose early in the morning and with a haversack on his back began the long walk from Johannesburg to Pretoria, a distance of thirty miles. Arriving at nightfall, weary, footsore and in the depths of despondency, he sought out the Salvation Army Hostel where, "for a bob or two and a prayer uttered over my head while I ate, I was given food and shelter for the night."<sup>45</sup> Early the next morning he resumed his trek to Hartebeestepoort.

Following a cursory medical examination he was set to work immediately with a pick and shovel under the direction of an Afrikaner ganger. After only two days his hands were in a terrible state and he asked to be moved to some other kind of work which would be less demanding on them. As a result he found himself required to shovel mud for upwards of ten hours a



night:<sup>46</sup>

"The drill was for us to go bare-foot into a large pool of slime and shift it elsewhere - not by any means a sinecure. When I was in the middle of this slime-shifting my new ganger gave me words of comfort from the security of the bank.

'The beauty of your job, jong'(sic.), he said, 'is that you don't wear out your boots and socks in it.'

'Thank you, sir,' I replied, 'that is a valuable compensatory factor.' My words, let alone my sarcasm were lost on him, which is all to the good, as no doubt the fellow meant well enough."

During this period his belongings were stolen leaving him with nothing but the clothes he stood up in. Next he was moved to a new job, working on the night shift which pushed trucks along a rail to the top of a spoil heap where others overturned them spilling their contents down the side. Six foot two and physically strong he had little difficulty in fulfilling this role and he soon graduated to the position of the man who overturned the trucks at the top. But with several lines converging at the summit some of the pushers were occasionally kept waiting while he dealt with the inevitable backlogs. This would provoke angry shouts of abuse from the pushers. One day an Afrikaner swore at him in English and Chesterton took exception to this considering it a personal insult:<sup>47</sup>

"I went up to the man and said: 'How dare you speak to me like that.' Leading with my left, I gave him an uppercut to the jaw with my right, putting all my weight behind it. To my horror he was knocked off the top of the dump and even as the rocks would go hurtling to the bottom far below I imagined that he must assuredly be killed. Peering over the edge I saw that by some miracle the man had been caught only a few yards below. Two other men holding my legs, lowered me so that I was able to grip his legs and then they hauled us both to the top. But for this kindness of Providence I would have had to stand trial, if not for murder, then almost certainly for manslaughter. Thereafter I was treated with an almost cringing respect."

After only three months on the project he decided that he had had enough of the life as a poor white labourer. During his time

there he had written a couple of articles on life at Hartebeestepoort. These had been accepted by Johannesburg papers.

Armed with the proceeds he decided to return to the city and try his luck as a freelance journalist. After walking back to Pretoria he had the luxury of travelling back to Johannesburg by train. On his arrival he stayed with a reporter friend and 'ghost wrote' some articles for him as well as doing freelance work. In the meantime his mother had written informing him of his stepfather's death and asking him to come home and manage the chicken farm in the Sunday River Valley, where she and his step-sister Sheila were living with a "young and somewhat insolent white foreman." In spite of his reservations on the matter ("I felt certain, our temperaments being what they were, that the arrangement would not work")<sup>48</sup> he decided that under the circumstances he could hardly refuse to give it a trial.

At Sunday River he learnt to look after six hundred hens during the day and spent his evenings writing articles for English and South African periodicals. After a while the inevitable happened, he quarrelled with his mother. In spite of the fact that his mother didn't pay him wages, allowing him his board only, while he provided his own pin money from writing, she still insisted on constantly referring to the supposed fact that she was 'keeping' him. Things finally came to a head when promised cheques from newspapers ceased to arrive, articles failed to return rejected and replies from publications dried up completely. He became quite frantic with bewilderment. Then he discovered that it was his sister's fault. He had arranged with her that she would collect his post from the village post office in nearby Addo, where she travelled to school each day.

One day, and quite by accident, he discovered that she had in fact been withholding his mail. The best excuse that she could muster was that she had forgotten to give it to him. He rejected her protestations of innocence and called her an "abominable little liar", avowing that in future he would collect his own mail:<sup>49</sup>

"My mother...intervened at this point to say. 'How dare you talk to your sister like that, just because she forgot to give your letters to you. You ought to be grateful to her for collecting them, but then gratitude is not in your nature. You are not even grateful for me keeping you.'

I thought of the six months unpaid labour I had devoted to the six hundred hens and their eggs and decided that the word 'keeping' had been used once too often.

I said nothing, but in a very short time I was on board ship travelling steerage, bound for my beloved England."

Behind him he left a South Africa increasingly dominated by Afrikaners. Ahead of him lay the mother country and the vague promise of a life of cultural "aspiration". But apart from that he was later to admit that he was drawn to England by a "compulsion" that he did not really understand.<sup>50</sup> For, after all, he had already experienced the betrayal of his higher ideals by the insatiable desire of the British to return to normality after the war. The year was 1924 and the angry young man was returning to a country even more determined to rely on the shibboleths of the past.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MANY ILLUSIONS

He tried many things and clasped many illusions.  
He tried to pretend that the English theatre was  
important; that fighting local government corruption  
was important; that many things were important.

A.K. Chesterton: "1914-1937: British Union Was Born  
in War." Action, November 13th 1937.

Kenneth Chesterton arrived back in London early in 1924, armed this time with first-rate references as a journalist. C.D. Don, the Editor of the Johannesburg Star, wrote of his "marked originality of thought and...great gift of style."

One of the Star's assistant editors recommended him as an excellent journalist, "accurate sub-editor", and a man who possessed a "fresh and original mind, notable critical faculty, great descriptive skill, and a highly individual and effective style in dealing either with serious subjects or those which lend themselves to lighter treatment."<sup>1</sup> Whilst still in South Africa he had written to his famous cousin to ask if G.K. could provide an introduction to Fleet Street editors. He was duly invited to G.K.'s house in Beaconsfield to talk things over:<sup>2</sup>

"On accepting the invitation to visit Beaconsfield on my return from South Africa I did a foolish thing in mentioning what I had done to an aunt of mine who had been made aware of my occasional weakness, and she wrote to Francis [G.K.'s wife] telling her all about it - why I do not know. As Gilbert had shown the same propensity in his Fleet Street days Francis became wary of me and even hostile, perhaps fearing that the two of us would give the Beaconsfield pubs a 'work out'. It was clear that Gilbert had been warned. He was more farouche than ever..[later]..Gilbert produced the press-cutting book I had sent him, was kind enough to say that I could write, but added that his own rise in Fleet Street was due to exceptional circumstances and that as he was no longer in touch with editors he thought the best thing I could do was to contact Cecil's widow Keith, who was beginning to win fame for her 'In darkest London' books...I went to see Keith - she had the only flat in Fleet Street - but ironically so far from this razor-brained woman putting work in my way, in two or three years time, when I was editor of The Shakespeare Review,\* it was I who commissioned articles from her and her coterie of friends."

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\*See Below, pp 107-110.

In fact his references were good enough to secure him a freelance foothold in Fleet Street, but the work did not appeal to him much and he successfully applied for the job of general journalist and "Festival Critic" on the Stratford-upon-Avon Herald. Now, at last, he was in his element: "behind the scenes of the great Shakespearian industry."<sup>3</sup> For this man, in search of the England of his dreams, the setting was near perfect. After only a few weeks with the paper Chesterton was able to record the following emotions after watching the Stratford May Day revels:<sup>4</sup>

"To understand the writer's point of view readers are invited to bear in mind that he has passed most of his years away from England, beneath a burning sun, and amongst peoples cruder and far less poetic than the English, peoples whose mode of life has shaped them for different traditions, and whose fancies are more savage and unsubdued. Nevertheless, he has carried with him, from one end of Africa to the other, an imaginative picture of the home of his fathers which he liked to think of as the very soul of England. Finding nothing in London, nothing in Wembley which corresponded with his vision, he began to think that it was no more than a dream-picture, when suddenly it loomed out of the shadows and took definite shape in the most charming setting that could be conceived, Stratford-upon-Avon.

The writer's delight was the greater since the scene was quite unexpected. He did not know what May Day celebrations were. To be perfectly frank, he had a notion that he would see red banners flying in the wind, and hear strange talk of class-hatred and oppression...It has been said that the revels were not so impressive this year as on some previous occasions. I can, however, make no comparisons. This much I do know: I have seen the soul of England for the first time. To me all else is a matter of indifference!"

The article, subtitled "A Colonial's Re discovery of England", underlines his idealistic vision of England, a vision that he had carried with him from childhood and which was to remain a motive force in his thinking until his death fifty years later. His move to Stratford added another dimension, or rather reinforced one element of his idealized vision of England, because it underlined his dislike of urban, industrial Britain, in contrast to rural England. Shortly after his arrival he wrote a piece for the paper in which he contrasted the two Englands, leaving

absolutely no doubt as to his preferences in the matter:<sup>5</sup>

"It is something of an adventure to travel up to London after spending the summer months in a town like Stratford...One feels oneself very much a stranger in a strange land; rather as though one had stumbled upon another planet where all things are reversed. The people who swarm the streets, with tired, preoccupied expressions on their faces, do not suggest that the city was made for men; they give the impression that men were made for the city...And indeed they are slaves these Londoners, they are slaves to that vast cruel scheme of things which they themselves have created and which has now turned tyrant and bound their souls with chains."

It was a theme that he was to develop during the 1920s and the following example, taken from a piece written in 1928, reflects his mature reflections on the subject:<sup>6</sup>

"A fair prospect of the Cotswold Hills could not destroy the existence of London, neither could the dreams of a visionary bring the honest soil to the doors of the Londoners. That was the illusory factor in my musing, but when I came to look at it squarely in the face, I was sustained by my new found truth. The superficial life of the city, with its complex nervous-system, may differ radically from the life of rural England, but it will never achieve any measure of harmony or self-realisation until it manages to capture something of the latter's essential simplicity. There is a call here for the master farmers of the city to test the land... The trouble is that the farmers are the wrong kind, men utterly without conscience, and these men have so contrived matters that the reaping is none of their business. They get their money for sowing alone. Consequently they sow weeds, and there is no spiritual Board of Agriculture to [stop] them."\*

These values would later be taken by Chesterton into the British Fascist movement at a later date.

In the meantime, as the Festival Critic, he was to find most of his attention absorbed by events on the stage rather than in the real world. Stratford provided those connected with the life

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\*For an excellent discussion of the development of this dichotomous view of the nation, Cf., Raymond Williams: The Country and the City, Paladin Books, St Albans, 1975, especially pp334-346. Williams writes that:"From about 1880 there was...a marked development of the idea of England as 'home', in that special sense in which 'home' is a memory and an ideal. Some of the images of this 'home' are of

of the theatre with many pleasant diversions and Chesterton recalled that:<sup>7</sup>

"the summers of the mid-twenties at Stratford offered the promise of an idyllic existence. There was the gaiety of the noon sessions at the 'Dirty Duck' (Black Swan). There were the happy afternoons, when free of engagements, in punting parties on the Avon, often with Festival actresses on board. And in the evening there were Festival performances and late supper parties."

Easily the most important figure in Chesterton's professional life in Stratford was Sir Archie Flower (at that time plain Archie), a millionaire brewer who had inherited the chairmanship of the Memorial Theatre's Board of Governors from his father. Chesterton remembered him as an autocrat, "whose reign over Stratford-upon-Avon came as near to absolutism as made no odds."<sup>8</sup> He recalled a Town Council debate on what to do with an ornamental stone flower-pot being postponed until Flower returned from a visit to the United States to make his wishes known.<sup>9</sup>

The two first met when Chesterton was sent to interview Flower at his home, 'The Hill'. In typical fashion Chesterton stormed out of the residence upon his realization that the butler would only let him enter via the tradesman's entrance. Returning to a surprised office he was happy to take the burden of the

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[Continued] central London: the powerful, the prestigious and the consuming capital. But many are of an idea of rural England: its green peace contrasted with the tropical or arid places of actual work; its sense of belonging, of community, idealized by contrast with the tensions of colonial rule and the isolated alien settlement. ....It is easy to see this in the generations of colonial officers, plantation managers and traders." Fritz Stern has made the following interesting observation of the more general phenomenon of expatriate idealization of the mother country: "During his years abroad, [Moeller Van Den Bruck]....discovered his passionate love for Germany. Far removed from the source of discontent, he constructed and succumbed to an idealized picture of Germany and its people....Germans have often discovered Germany from abroad." The Politics of Cultural Despair, U.C.L.A. Press, Berkley, Los Angeles, 1974, p191.



inevitable phone call from Flower off the shoulders of Rupert Boyden, the Herald's proprietor — who had a dread of scenes. When the call did come Chesterton took the phone and after a rapid interchange of views replaced the receiver:<sup>10</sup>

".. 'Well?' asked Rupert anxiously. 'He's coming down to fetch me himself.' Rupert looked amazed. Sutcliffe, the foreman printer who had heard the whole episode, gave a grin and said in his broad Yorkshire: 'Well done, lad.' Five minutes later Archie Flower came into the office, offered me his apologies and drove me back to 'The Hill'. Thus began a friendship that lasted until Archie's death. He was good to me in many ways and for my own part I believe I contributed services which helped him, among other things, to obtain the Knighthood he so richly deserved."

This was the period in Stratford of what Chesterton calls the 'actor laddies' in his autobiography and he also made friends from amongst their ranks:<sup>11</sup>

"They were the real professionals, and none the less so because they were Shakespeare specialists. Ambitious young actors and actresses found it useful to be able to claim that they had played a season or two at Stratford, but longer than that was considered theatrical death...The Shakespearian specialists would arrive for the Spring and Summer Festivals in high spirits, but because they were as dependent on Stratford as Stratford was upon them, the approach of winter could always be read in the growing anxiety discernable in their eyes...But while the going was good it was very good indeed. The summers were bountiful and many a delightful midday would we spend, actors, critics and visiting notables, on the verandah of the 'Dirty Duck', athwart the river Avon - discussing present productions, past productions and productions about to be put on. Probably the talk was not as good as I thought it to be at the time. Although he had all Shakespeare and his universe, the actor laddie perhaps quite naturally tended to be obsessively self-centred."

His closest actor friends of the period were Kenneth Wicksteed and Teddy Morgan. Of Wicksteed he remarked: "While greatness missed him, he was perhaps the finest Shakespearian all-rounder in the business." Morgan: "belonged less to the Shakespearian theatre than the old barn-storming traditions."<sup>12</sup> But in terms of Chesterton's wider dramatic appreciation he gained much more from an actor acquaintance - Randle Ayrton. Chesterton considered him to have been, "the very greatest Shakespearian actor I have ever

known or seen...and although actors are a more jealous crowd than most people I never heard a single voice raised to decry his genius."<sup>13</sup> On occasion they would sit and talk about the theatre and the plays in the Bancroft Gardens beside the old Memorial Theatre, and Chesterton derived the utmost satisfaction from these discussions - especially those relating to character analysis in relation to the plays.

Thanks to his dedication to the dramatic arts and the theatre, and his natural flair for dramatic criticism, Chesterton soon acquired a reputation as a sound Festival critic:<sup>13</sup>

"I do not doubt that many of my views were jejune, that many of my enthusiasms were excessive and that I totally ignored Quiller-Couch 's injunction to writers to kill their darlings. Even so, my critiques came to be regarded as possessing insight and discernment, my praise was valued and my dispraise feared. It was recognised, I think, that I was not for sale."

This last claim is certainly correct, for while he could be unstinting in his praise for a particular production or performance, he never hesitated to castigate what he considered to be a below-par effort. A classic example of this is contained in a criticism he made of a production of Shaw's St. Joan, which was directed by Chloe Gibson (who also played the leading role) a close friend of Chesterton after he moved to Torquay in 1929. The review, written for the Torquay press in 1931, pulls very few punches:<sup>14</sup>

"The production of St. Joan at the Pavilion last week struck me as a brave charade, magnificent in its aspirations, prodigious in its effort, well-nigh perfect in its mechanics, and yet abysmal in its failure to do even the remotest justice to the dramatist's towering inspiration...The lovely music of Miss Gibson's voice sounded through the part like the lovely music of an organ. All the boundless skill, all the great energy, all the imaginative devices which she possesses went into the making of the role, and the result was some spurts of really good acting. But the result was not an interpretation of St. Joan. Artifice here went to its very limits, but it did not reach art. We had to take the maid's bucolic origin on trust. Similarly we had to take on trust the spiritual fires in her which have shone from one century to another. The words of the text were beautifully spoken but the mysteries of

"personality remained a mystery to the end. Never once did the actress disappear and the character emerge. Acting strove gallantly for the heights, but lack of inspiration held it resolutely to the ground. Acting did everything possible for acting to do, but the barriers set between one personality and another personality were insuperable. An heroic simularcrum, but nothing more - unless it be the recreation of the Joan of Arc of the history books. That is no reflection on Miss Gibson's qualities as an actress. It is simply that there are some characters whose likeness is not to be reached by acting, but only by communion of spirit, and St. Joan is one of these characters."

By this stage in his career as a critic Chesterton was well aware of the effect of such a review and added a final paragraph defending his position:

"The writing of this notice will, of course, be taken as an indication of spite, spleen, bias, and every other atrocious meanness of spirit under the sun - not by Miss Gibson and her company, I am sure, but by others. It has happened before, and it will happen again before the end of the world, when some of these good people may conceivably learn to recognize detachment when they see it, and discover on whose side the injustice of the thing lay."

A further example of Chesterton's uncompromising stand on such matters, once again drawn from his Torquay writings, can be seen in his notice of the play The First Mrs Frazer, a play written by Mr St. John Ervine, the theatre critic of the Observer and moreover, the man Chesterton considered to be the finest theatre critic of his day. Regard for the man was not, however, to be allowed to stand in the way of a brutally honest review by Chesterton:<sup>15</sup>

"Does Shakespeare despise the theatre?' asked Mr St. John Ervine in the Observer on Sunday, and he eventually arrived at the conclusion that he did. Judging by The First Mrs Frazer [he] takes his stand with Shakespeare...I cannot believe that it gave Mr St. John Ervine any pleasure to write such pitiful stuff...the wit is cheap, obvious, often stale, smart with that 'smartness' which [he] in a happier mood deplores, and nine times out of ten, positively creaking with the dramatist's strain to be clever; catchpenny stuff, in short, that panders to a public which is supposed to have neither brains nor taste, and which unfortunately does nothing to belie this supposition."

If he was capable of being so honest about his friends' and allies' work, it is easy to imagine his reaction to those whose artistic philosophy ran contrary to his own inclinations. Thus, in an attack on the Daily Mail's theatre critic Hannen Swaffer, who had boasted that: "I have always had my own way, and I always shall. Nobody can stop me, because I know my job," he dismissed him out of hand:<sup>16</sup>

"The mere fact of a man boasting of his influence on popular journalism seems to us to discount his claim to be reckoned as an authority upon something which is neither cheap, 'catchy', nor ephemeral, but an abiding inspiration and solace to mankind...his 'stunt' criticism is responsible for creating an atmosphere in which bad drama can flourish. If the function of dramatic art is nothing more than the entertainment of the masses then no quarrel can be found with this loose and violent kind of criticism. But dramatic art has a vaster significance than this. Its raison d'etre is to exalt and inspire; to show, behind all its vice and pettiness and cruelty, the true sublimity of mankind. But it will never be able to justify itself in the modern world, and serve these high ends, until the critic comes to believe that 'the play's the thing', and not the exploitation of his own personality."\*

From such instances it is easy to appreciate how it was that Chesterton acquired a reputation as a critic whose praise was valued and dispraise feared, and whose pen was definitely not for sale - even for friendship's sake. In this context it is perhaps useful to recall his words about Sherriff's character Stanhope in *Journey's End*: "a man almost militantly moral by nature."

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\*At this point it is necessary to note that the actual content of Chesterton's dramatic criticism will be analysed in much greater detail in the next chapter. This is because his cultural and artistic values were so important in providing the political, social and moral basis of his pre-Fascist thought that it is necessary to deal with them separately from the chronological schema of contemporary events during the 1920s and early 1930s. The present chapter will, therefore, deal with the actual sequence of events and Chesterton's reactions to them during this period, since many of his ideas were developed in response to non-theatrical phenomena and quite apart from this it is necessary to fill in the background to this portion of his life.

This was one of the characteristics of Chesterton which most impressed Archie Flower and he was often wont to consult Chesterton during the 1920s and early 30s about important decisions concerning the theatre. In return for his friendship and advice Flower made every effort to promote Chesterton's career. One of his first acts was to pack Chesterton off to a certain establishment in Rickmansworth (run by a Doctor Hogg, an uncle of Quintin Hogg the Conservative Parliamentarian) which was dedicated to 'drying out' those who had become too fond of alcohol for their own good. Security was very tight and yet, to Dr. Hogg's mystified chagrin, so were many of the inmates. Chesterton recalled an amusing exchange between himself and the good doctor:<sup>17</sup>

"One evening I was the only sober man among a score of patients. Puzzled beyond measure, Dr. Hogg asked me to come to his room for a talk.

'Chesterton', he said - he treated us all rather like schoolboys and we all treated him rather like a headmaster - 'do you happen to know by what means your fellow patients manage to secure alcohol?' 'Yes Dr. Hogg,' I replied. 'Then may I ask you to let me have the information?' 'I am sorry, Dr. Hogg.' 'But surely you realise that it is in your own interest I ask?' 'Yes, but even so the habit of not sneaking has become engrained.' 'Your attitude is most unhelpful - I might even say priggish.'

This was a bit too much. 'Dr. Hogg,' I said, 'would you please not use insulting language to me. I am not a prig. It is no responsibility of mine to see that your patients do not get drunk, but it is very much your responsibility. And if it is possible for me to know by what means alcohol enters the premises, then it should be equally possible for you and your staff to find out.'

I wished him good-night and went to bed."\*

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\*The alcohol was reaching Dr. Hogg's unwilling charges via the local river which ran right past the grounds of the house. Accomplices would load tiny boats with one bottle of whiskey and float it off up-stream of the house. It would then be intercepted by the patients who would exchange the bottle for money and relaunch the boats to be collected by the suppliers downstream.

Unfortunately the combined efforts of Archie Flower's money and Dr. Hogg's methods failed to cure Chesterton of his self-destructive habit, in spite of his sobriety during his stay at Rickmansworth:<sup>18</sup>

"There were two reasons why I was the only sober patient in the place. Firstly, I wanted to be cured. Secondly I did not want to let Archie Flower down. Alas, if Dr. Hogg had the secret of a cure he failed to impart it to me. It was not until later I discovered for myself that the only cure for alcoholism is to stop drinking alcohol."

No more successful in its long term success was another joint venture by Archie Flower and his young protege - the short lived Shakespeare Review, which was founded in 1928, ostensibly to refute the claims of the so-called "apron-stage traditionalists", but also as a vehicle of personal artistic expression for Chesterton who was the Editor of the monthly journal.<sup>19</sup>

The first issue, which appeared in May 1928, could equally have been renamed "The Chesterton Review", as it not only included Kenneth Chesterton's contributions, but an article on Shakespeare and Shaw by G.K. Chesterton, and the first of a series of articles by Mrs. Cecil Chesterton (Keith) entitled "Drama in London". Chesterton had also contacted Bernard Shaw with a view to commissioning an article from him. Somewhat foolishly he recalled that as a child he had sat upon Shaw's knee at his grandfather's house in Herne Hill, and Shaw delighted in referring to this in his withering reply:<sup>19</sup>

"No dear, I am too busy. And I doubt whether one so young should be encouraged to take up the hobby of men who are born old. There is something discomfoting in the thought that I once dangled a little fossil on my knee. If you wish to make money out of Stratford, keep an hotel for Americans and leave Shakespeare otherwise alone." "P.S. Are you male or female?"

Chesterton recalled that he had sent back a reply intended to be

equally withering but which "probably only succeeded in being pert".<sup>20</sup>

Apart from his strictly dramatic appreciations which appeared in the main body of the journal (and will be reviewed in detail in the next chapter) it is most interesting to note the philosophy which emerged in his editorial articles. From the outset he made it plain that his crusade on behalf of Shakespeare's drama was intended to have a much wider application than to refute critics of the way the Stratford Festival was staged. Rather, we are plunged back into his wartime experiences and the anguish he felt at the failure of post-war conditions to provide a suitable context for a mass cultural renaissance:<sup>21</sup>

"Our first concern will be to do whatever lies in our power to combat the demoralising futility of our times. Seldom has there been a period so sterile in thought, so lacking in idealism, or so devoid of honest purpose, as the period following the Great War, and what makes matters infinitely more tragic is that the futility has not come of its own accord, but has been deliberately organized by men who have discovered how profitable a game it is to exploit the literacy of the masses...Surely to Heaven it was not for this that the valiant English dead yielded up their lives; surely their sacrifice had some purpose other than that Priapus should emerge from the woods to haunt the streets in plus-fours, his wild hair smoothed down, and stinking of brilliantine!...the one thing needed is a new spirit in the land, and that spirit can only be created by superimposing upon the literacy of the nation a real education which will enable it to reject the cheap and nasty, and feed its brains on better things...We wish to provide the lovers of Shakespeare with a banner round which they may gather...We wish to herald the fame of the world's master-singer in such a way that the purveyors of pornographic filth will fly before the vanguard of a renaissance which will redeem the sacrifice of a million brave Englishmen on the fields of France.

The first issue of the journal met with some critical acclaim, but The Times reviewer noted this tendency of the editor to take "a gloomy view of the age which his journal is intended to reform."<sup>22</sup>

A correspondent to the second edition complained that: "It

seems incredible that anyone with a knowledge and appreciation of Shakespeare's plays could be so prejudiced as to include the whole literary, scientific and moral output of the times as 'demoralising futility'...We are told that 'the only life worth living is a life of culture.' 'What a cold-blooded precious kind of existence.'<sup>23</sup>

Chesterton's reply to such criticism was typically uncompromising:<sup>24</sup>

"I intend to plead guilty of the charge of taking a gloomy view of the age and to enter a plea of justification. It is a mean, tawdry, rapacious, cut-throat, incompetent age, disgustingly unworthy of the sacrifices made for it by its parent - that long, long age, that eternity of suffering, which was 1914-18...Apparently the catastrophe was not spectacular enough to impress our leaders; there was not sufficient blood-letting; youth did not die in sufficient millions to bring them vision. Here was a fine ending for all our hopes - the discovery that the war had not been waged for high ideals, but to allow the men who had their fingers on the pulse of communal life in 1914 to retain their grip on the pulse of life in 1918...The old gangs continued to play musical chairs for office. The newspapers of the better class continued to cackle the same dreary inanities; and the newspapers which were cheap and nasty rejoiced to find the times propitious for becoming cheaper and nastier still...the next war will be spectacular enough to impress the leaders of mankind with a sense of their responsibility. But by then it will be too late. The survivors, you may be sure, will not trust again in leadership. Anarchy will walk the earth, and all the labours of the centuries will have been in vain. There will no longer be a dear, sound, sensible, grandfatherly old Times printing its exquisitely worded leading articles...A man's a fool nowadays, it is openly avowed, who worries about anything or anybody but himself; and exquisite sentiment finds its apotheosis in the Vested Interest which tyrannises over all things, and has no hand-clasp for mankind...It is not surprising that the supreme beatitude of popular education has been to enable the masses to read the sugar-sweet captions on the screen, or that modern men and women will do anything under the sun rather than look a new idea squarely in the face. None of these things are surprising because there is no Vision in the world and where there is no Vision the people perish."

That such a justification should be put forward for the production of a journal entitled The Shakespeare Review is an indication of the degree to which Chesterton's artistic and political values had become interwoven by this time.



Such high ideals, however, were to prove less useful in keeping the journal afloat than Flower's financial support. In the winter of 1928-29 Flower left for the U.S.A. on a fund-raising trip for the Memorial Theatre and left Chesterton without funds to pay his staff, printers, contributors, or anybody else for that matter, and without authority to draw on the periodical's bank account. Letters sent to Flower in America either failed to reach him, or evoked the reply that he would deal with the matter upon his return. The situation soon became hopeless and Chesterton had no choice but to let the journal fold after the October edition had gone to the printers.

This was the final straw for Chesterton. His refusal to compromise in print had made him many enemies in Stratford and with the destruction of the old theatre in a fire in 1926 there had been a decline in the old Festival spirit. In his autobiography Chesterton recalled that: "I decided to look for work in London. Truth to tell, I was not sorry to leave Stratford and Stratford, smarting from the forthrightness of my tongue and pen, was delighted to get rid of me. The glory for me had departed."<sup>25</sup> But there was more to it than this, for Chesterton was hopelessly in love with a local married woman and in choosing to leave Stratford he was able to take her with him to London where they were to live as man and wife. In this respect Chesterton's militant morality cannot be said to encompass his private life, which was by this time in considerable disarray.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, in spite of his unhappy break with the town, Chesterton's association with its theatre was far from over. During his final year in Stratford Chesterton had become closely involved with

plans for fund raising and approving the design of the new theatre. As the local theatre critic he wrote many articles for the Stratford Herald in support of the campaign to raise money for the rebuilding fund. In some ways this was a painful episode for Chesterton. The British public failed to respond in anything like sufficient numbers to the appeal. Archie Flower, determined to raise the necessary sum as quickly as possible, succeeded in raising money in America. After his first trip Chesterton questioned him closely and doubted the advisability of publicizing the fact that the American Fund was very much greater than the British. He also pointed out that the fund was still insufficient to contemplate the commencement of rebuilding work:<sup>27</sup>

"Archie Flower's annoyance with me showed that I had succeeded in my task of deflation. He brooded on what I had said and his method of resolving the problem was typical. By persuading Rocke feller or whoever it was to give a similarly large donation to the British Fund he honestly believed he had met my point and secured an honourable balance."

Quite apart from widespread public apathy, the lack of interest shown by much of the popular press in the need for a new theatre also reinforced Chesterton's intense dislike of these publications. He poured out his anger and disgust in an article in the Shakespeare Review:<sup>28</sup>

"This catch-as-you-catch-can policy of the popular press is the greatest enemy of culture today. But for that, and the fact that Englishmen have never had the vision to look upon the drama as something national and splendid, we should long ago have been able to rebuild the Stratford Theatre, accepting America's contribution with gratitude untinged with shame."

Another problem arose over the judges' choice of design for the new building. Elizabeth Scott's winning design was quite revolutionary in its functional simplicity, especially when contrasted with the old High Victorian buildings that had originally

graced the site.\* At first both he and Flower were shaken by the judges' choice. But, upon reflection, Chesterton suggested to his friend that a local press campaign could be mounted which would stress the functional nature of the design and its contribution to modern architecture in Britain. Flower supported the idea and Chesterton wrote a number of articles in the Herald which helped to smooth Flower's task of convincing the highly conservative Stratford theatre establishment that a modern design was a good idea.

Flower was grateful for this and other instances when Chesterton had proved useful and kept in touch with Chesterton after he had left Stratford. Then, early in 1932, Flower invited Chesterton to visit him in Stratford: "He asked me to write a special souvenir for the occasion of the opening. He also asked me to write the speech for the Prince of Wales. He asked me to 'look over' his own speech for the special luncheon. And he asked me to be a guest at the banquet at 'The Hill' on the opening night."<sup>29</sup>

All these tasks were duly accomplished by Chesterton and, on April 23rd, 1932, he stood with 40,000 others to hear his own words spoken by the Prince of Wales in opening the theatre. Naturally enough the speech had a distinctly Chestertonian ring to it:<sup>30</sup>

"Shakespeare was, above all things, an Englishman. He loved his country with a great and passionate love, and his magic verse not only breathes the air of the countryside, the air of our

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\*Shaw had hated the old buildings and upon learning of its destruction, and in typical fashion, he sent a telegram to the Festival Director. It read, quite simply: "Congratulations: you must be delighted." Cf., A.K. Chesterton: Brave Enterprise: A History of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. London, 1934, p29.

"long, still Summer afternoons, but strikes back into the very heart of our history, with all its pageantry and daring. We feel proud that this distinctive atmosphere of old England is kept alive here, so that our visitors may capture its essence, and take away with them lasting memories...Although in one sense Shakespeare's appeal is peculiarly addressed to the hearts and minds of his fellow countrymen, his genius is yet universal, and evokes the homage of the men of all nations. What is equally important, he speaks as significantly for the man-in-the-street as he does for the student, so that, in a double sense, he may be described as a universal poet.

The secret of this wide appeal is that Shakespeare took an intense interest in this workaday world of ours, and was too much in love with living ever to become engrossed with mere theories about life. He delighted in all swift, true things - the galloping horses, the music of hounds, the skill and backbone of the men-at-arms, and the quiet courage so often to be found in the simplest human heart."

A few days later Archie Flower (now Sir Archie) received a letter from the Prince's private secretary thanking Chesterton for his speech which the King had been shown and had described as "excellent".<sup>31</sup>

Chesterton's subsequent association with Stratford was sporadic and conducted mostly at a distance. From 1933 to 1939 he received a small retainer for doing publicity work for the theatre, and in 1933 Flower had commissioned him to write the Official History of the Memorial Theatre, which Chesterton subsequently considered to be "about the worst book ever published",<sup>32</sup> (although it was still on sale in the theatre foyer in the 1950s ).

But in the winter of 1928-29 Chesterton wanted nothing more to do with Stratford and so he and his woman friend packed their bags and travelled to London where he found work, initially as a freelance, and later as a sub-editor on Fleet Street. Then, in March 1929, they moved yet again, this time to the South Devon town of Torquay, where he had been successful in securing the job of Editor in Chief to the Torquay Times group of newspapers.

As one would expect of Chesterton he was greatly relieved to have escaped the clutches of London for this far away rural community, and this is reflected in his first article for the Torquay Press:<sup>33</sup>

"I would not go back to that old Fleet Street...for the simple reason that I have found a place where one may live - and not merely earn a living. I would not go back because I have found a harbour of refuge wherein I may be secure from the fate of the young fellows of the London Street of Ink who must needs write with their tongues in their cheeks and barter their convictions for bread, with never an illusion left to lose. It must be sad, I feel, never to have an illusion left to lose!"

Yet, unbeknown to Chesterton, a pattern had been established which was to be repeated throughout the rest of his life. Already he had left his job with the Johannesburg Star after some acrimony; now he had left Stratford and a similarly secure position to come to Torquay. In the future he would leave Torquay thoroughly dissatisfied with the place. And, ultimately he was destined to reject Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, a secure job with Beaverbrook as his 'personal journalist', and even the National Front, from which he resigned as Chairman, in great bitterness in 1970. For Chesterton was essentially a loner and very much his own man, and was temperamentally inclined to sacrifice his career for his principles whenever a choice was presented between the two.

But for now Chesterton seemed destined for a successful career in journalism. His appointment as Editor in Chief of a group of provincial newspapers at the early age of 29 was a considerable achievement, especially when it is realised that he had only entered the profession nine years earlier. He proved to be a very competent editor and during his time in Torquay presided

over the takeover of the rival Torquay Newspaper - the Torquay Directory, as well as setting up two smaller newspapers in South Devon.<sup>34</sup> At the same time he was the Chairman of the South Devon branch of the National Union of Journalists. From his new position of Editorial power Chesterton was now free to comment on whatever local issue took his interest and the unwitting citizens of Torquay were soon in no doubt as to his opinions on a wide variety of subjects - much to the discomfort of some amongst them.

It is important to remember that by the time he arrived in Torquay he was already well acquainted with the art of public debate. In Stratford he had engaged in a protracted and bitter debate with the 'apron-stagers' and Shakespeare in modern dress supporters, and had clashed in the letter columns of the Stratford Herald with several local notables.<sup>35</sup> In these disputes he had sharpened his polemical style and was now a formidable opponent in such matters. But occasionally he found an adversary capable of testing his wits and matching him in rhetorical acrimony. Just such an opponent took the field against Chesterton over the issue of a proposal to extend the Torquay licensing hours and the ensuing debate is interesting both for its ferocity and the content of Chesterton's argument.

Chesterton set the ball rolling with an editorial in the Torquay Times denouncing the Torquay Bench for refusing to extend the local hours of licensing. Drawing on personal experience (after all he was an alcoholic) he attacked religious detractors of the scheme for believing that the amount of alcohol consumed by an individual stands in direct proportion to

the number of hours during which it may be obtained. In this context he referred darkly to the confused morals of "Chapel Meetings" and concluded that:<sup>36</sup>

"Morality only deserves the name when it is free. The virtue of the slave who is forbidden to do things which he would otherwise do is not worth a moments purchase, and the sooner that fact is realised the sooner will men enjoy a much nobler intellectual and moral stature than they do now."

All this was too much for a fierce local Free Churchman, with the suitably resonant name of Moffat Gautrey. He retorted, in a letter to the Times, that it was not simply the idea of Free Churchmen that the old hours were a safeguard against excessive drinking but were also:<sup>37</sup>

"the judicial findings of those authorised and competent to make investigations on behalf of various governments, and that testimony cannot be controverted. If it be not true, why are the liquor sellers so keen for 'that extra half-hour'? ...Your final statement that 'morality only deserves the name when it is free,' sounds alright, but it presupposes a regenerated humanity, to which we have not attained at present, [and] Apart from that 'slave virtue', society as at present organised could not exist."

Chesterton's reply to this is most interesting:<sup>38</sup>

"it is solely against the drunkard that our opponents are able to present any case...as one who started journalism reporting police-court cases in Johannesburg I can affirm that the white population which was allowed to drink throughout the day and the better part of the night, yielded one case of drunkenness to about every ten from the native population, which is forbidden by law to touch alcohol!

In conclusion...Mr. Gautrey says that without 'slave-virtues' society as it is at present organised could not exist. Are we, on that assumption, to train the child to govern its appetites by placing the lump of sugar out of its reach?...Where an overwhelming preponderance of opinion is recorded upon issues involving principles of absolute right and absolute wrong, then it is only just and expedient that this opinion should be mobilized to enforce the will of the people, but where there is no question of absolute right or absolute wrong, and there is clear evidence of a strong and valid difference of view, I cannot but think that coercive measures are an impertinence, and that those who advocate

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"the employment of such measures would be doing better work minding their own business, or fighting those real and flagrant abuses of our times, which admit no difference of opinion among honest men, and yet against which the voice of the organised churches is never raised....the less one interferes with the liberty of the people the more certain one may be that one is following the path of wisdom oneself, and helping to build up the sense of a high dignity and moral responsibility in one's fellow men."

Moffat Gautrey was warming to his task:<sup>39</sup>

"It is a refreshment to my spirit to be welcomed by you into the arena. I had begun to think that my fighting days were done; and that no battlefield was possible in this delectable Torquay. But even in Eden there was an adversary, not that I am insinuating that there is any subtlety in you - far from it...It is no use saying that 'these moral imbeciles cannot be protected against themselves.'\* They can! I have protected scores, by means of a pledge of total abstinence plus the grace of God...I too have travelled in South Africa [and your's is a] comparison without value. A white man needs to be very drunk indeed to excite the interest of the police, whereas a native is pushed 'in clink' for the most trivial trespass. That you know quite well...Some appetites need restraint, or they become dominant and a curse. Moral bankruptcy is not the result of restraint, but of excess..No man has liberty to do as he likes. We have only liberty to do as we ought. Apart from this civilization could not exist."

Chesterton was singularly unimpressed:<sup>40</sup>

"Every man must conquer his own vices. Moral bankruptcy comes when he refuses to enter the battle, and to imagine that a training for life may best be encompassed by removing the causes of temptation, would be to start as a mere theorist, and to end with the responsibility of having fashioned a nation of moral bankrupts... 'We have only the liberty to do as we ought'. But who is to dictate the 'ought'? Why should it be Mr. Gautrey and his friends? Hierarchies have made too many howling blunders for the world ever again to submit to their dictatorship."

The issue petered out after another exchange of views which tended to degenerate into personal insult.

Moffat Gautrey certainly gave as good as he got, but it is Chesterton's contribution that is of interest here. The first

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\*The actual phrase used by Chesterton was: "these moral imbeciles who need to be protected against themselves."



point to note is Chesterton's dissatisfaction with all forms of 'organised' religion. As we saw in an earlier piece this was related to his experiences in the trenches, which led him to castigate: "smug religiosity [which] sought to comfort itself for that most shocking slaughter of Youth, and seeks to do so still in retrospect."<sup>41</sup>\*

The second point of interest in Chesterton's argument is his almost classical 'liberal' position with regard to individual liberty and responsibility for one's own actions. Only on universally agreed issues of right and wrong is he prepared to allow collective interference with individual appetites. Given the fact that this debate took place in the March and April of 1932 (that is only a little over a year before he joined Molsey's Fascist movement) it is a little surprising to find him adopting such a position. For instance how would Chesterton, the Fascist, square his beliefs with the statement that: "Hierarchies have made too many howling blunders for the world ever again to submit to their dictatorship."?

And yet, in a certain sense such a position is congruent with his later Fascist ideals, in the sense that Chesterton sees man's mission to reform himself as a necessary prelude to collective

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\*This was a rejection he shared with many of his former comrades. Graves and Hodge have detailed the cause: "a contempt, mixed with envy [was felt for] all ministers of religion, except Roman Catholic chaplains who were...always at hand...and the exceptional Dissenting or Anglican 'Woodbine Willies', who lent the stretcher bearers a hand on bad days...The B.E.F. were in general irreligious: they had reduced morality to the single virtue of loyalty. The Seven Deadly Sins...were venial, so long as a man was courageous and a reasonably trustworthy comrade. God as an all-wise Providence was dead; blind Chance succeeded to the Throne." The Long Weekend, Faber and Faber, London, 1941, p15.

action and national revival. He was a great believer in the volitional quality in human nature and the ability of the free individual to achieve 'moral responsibility'. In another article of the Torquay period he amplified this point:<sup>42</sup>

"My own opinion, for what it is worth, is that the semblance of determinism only arises from accidental causes. Men are endowed with legs, and the rule holds good even though here and there an individual may meet with a mishap which robs him of their use. So it is with free-will. Here and there circumstances may crop up which rob us of our power of volition, but the principle still abides."

As his wife recently recalled: "Kenneth never accepted the word 'inevitable', he believed that mankind had a strong hold on its destiny."<sup>43</sup> Under the impact of Fascist ideas this belief was to mature into the assertion that the corporate ethic could only be built between individuals in total control of themselves and their baser desires. Then, and only then, could Fascist collectivism and hierarchical leadership become practical.

Another issue which attracted Chesterton's attention while in Torquay, and which reveals more of his pre-Fascist thinking, was the local spiritualist controversy. In May 1931 two spiritualist friends brought the nationally famous medium, Mrs. Meurig Morris, to Torquay. She claimed to be 'controlled' by several spirits, the most notable of which, and that which she produced in Torquay, was 'Power' - a male preacher who thundered out his sermons every Sunday evening in a London theatre through the medium of the tiny Mrs. Morris.

After seeing her in action Chesterton returned to his office and penned the following thoughts:<sup>44</sup>

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"The writer is not easily led astray by those things which sometimes appear to assail the reason, and writing dispassionately, and no less critically than if he were reviewing a play, he assures those readers who were not present that all this was indeed a wonder of wonders - a miracle!"

He went on to refute any 'rationalist' explanations for the phenomenon he had witnessed, dismissing criminal deception, the retrieval of subconsciously stored information, and the 'race memory' theory of C.G. Jung - which he considered: "would be the most fantastic and unscientific explanation of all." Rather he was predisposed to accept the medium's explanation for the strange events he had observed:

"It is a solemn thought to record, for one whose attitude towards such things during seventeen years has been an attitude largely agnostic,\* but it must be recorded none the less, that here we have evidence of the survival after death which the human reason cannot honestly refute."

As one would expect he was most impressed by 'Power's' attack on organized religion which 'he' depicted as appearing to lose sight of the original spirit of Christian teachings by dogmatic insistence upon the Bible. Nevertheless he was not willing to break with his agnostic stance in favour of a specific conception of God:

"If I am asked whether the experience of listening to 'Power' assumed any ultimate apocalyptical significance in my mind I will have to confess that it did not. The appeal was directed to the reason, and the reason is judicial, permitting no communion with the emotions. Emotionally I was left high and dry, while mentally sifting the evidence to look for ultimate beatitudes and rhapsodies, even though the evidence went to show that a miraculous thing was happening before my eyes.

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\*Significantly this would put his loss of faith in such matters at around 1915-1916 - the period when he entered the war in German East Africa.

"And indeed, quite apart from this, neither our own life, nor the life immediately beyond, according to 'Power', admits the possibility of a final revelation. Neither am I tempted to join a Spiritualist church, or attend seances.\* It is enough for us, surely, to get on with the job in hand, according to the very best of our abilities, without worrying about what lies ahead, providing, of course, that the light of our conscience is not too dim to show us the way.

But at the same time evidence has been produced to show that something does indeed lie ahead, and until that evidence is disproved I have no option but to proclaim that I have witnessed a miracle which testifies to the reality of a spiritual world beyond the grave."

The article provoked a storm of protest from many Christian denominations and Chesterton published the letters along with his reply to some of the points raised:<sup>45</sup>

"I am not acquainted with the literature of spiritualism... however...if my reading of psychology has not been profound, it has at least been fairly wide, and I have found nothing in Hobhouse, James,...Mr. Baldwin, Lock, [sic.] or Hume, or in the findings of the psycho-analytical school, or yet in any of the major philosophers to permit me to lay to the credit of the subconscious mind the phenomenon of a young woman not naturally eloquent,...speaking most eloquently for hours on end on subjects which could only be tackled by a trained intelligence of exceptional fundamental capacity...I gladly accept the amendations of 'A Christian Spiritualist', although I must join issue with him when he tells me that people who get on and do their jobs as well as they can in this world, without worrying too much about the hereafter, are necessarily in thrall to materialism. Was Shakespeare a materialist? Or Shelley? Were any of the great poets materialists? Or more than a few of the great philosophers?...When the spiritualist Churches promise to put us in touch with minds as stimulating as these, then I for one will go to them for my inspiration, but not before..Whatever our destinies in the hereafter may be it is my firm belief that our present destiny is to do the best we can with the present world, and to make of it as clean-cut and honourable a place as lies in our power. In the pursuance of this great work we can develop our characters, clarify our minds, help forward the good, resist the evil, seek out beauty, and at all times face life with disinterestedness and courage. If that be not a full time job...I underestimate the capacity of my fellow-men."

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\*He had in fact already attended a seance with Evan Powell, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's favourite medium, an experience which left him similarly agnostic in his inclinations. Cf., Blame Not My Lute, Chapter 19, pp1-2.

He then dispatched copies of the letters and his articles to Mrs. Morris, along with a suggestion that she might care to come back to Torquay in order that 'Power' could answer his critics in person, so to speak. This was duly arranged and Chesterton made a special trip back from a holiday in the North of England to cover the event. This time he was more convinced than ever that he had witnessed a divine revelation:<sup>46</sup>

"Power spoke...with a heightened consciousness of the glory and significance of life as it may be lived now and as it may be lived when Shelley's 'dome of many coloured glass' no longer 'stains the white radiance of eternity.'...I for one verily believe that 'Power' has come back to earth to restore Christ to the Churches...Last time I recorded that intellectually I saw no way round the phenomenon, and therefore felt obliged to proclaim that I had witnessed a miracle. This time I will go much further and testify to my absolute belief in this strange revelation, in which I perceive a new vision of life, an untold source of spiritual strength and a manifold glory. On the previous occasion people tried to make capital out of my confession - the people who do not agree with me upon matters of municipal administration.\* On this occasion as on the last, their hoots of derision (and triumph) will leave me unperturbed.

I am convinced that the revelation is full of splendour of holiness and love."\*\*

But, while Chesterton was quite prepared to acknowledge the power of God, he was totally unwilling to go any further and seek the answer to his quest for meaning in organized religion. For

\*See below, pp132-140.

\*\*In fact, although he remained a convinced agnostic, his opinion of Meurig Morris underwent some modification towards scepticism as Chesterton explained in his autobiography: "Mrs. Alice Tweedale, who lived in Torquay, had written a book 'The Cosmic Christ', which I had read without great interest, but which I thought would interest Mrs. Morris. On a subsequent occasion I heard huge chunks of the book issuing from the lips of 'Power', without acknowledgement. [However] Unless the other phenomenon associated with the medium were to be proved attributable to normal causes, I felt that there was nothing to do but accept this explanation, albeit with a certain mental reservation. 'Power' stepped down a peg in my estimation - that was all." Blame Not My Lute, Chapter 19, p3.

him, since the kingdom of God remains unknowable, it was mankind's task to perfect the temporal world, which was in itself a spiritual act sanctioned by divine authority. This can be clearly seen in the following piece of musing, written by Chesterton after a solitary walk around the streets of Stratford on Christmas night 1926:<sup>47</sup>

"What a grand brave thing is human life to be sure! When the oldest cynic is dead, and the last dire cataclysm surges down to blot out our race for ever, there will still be, here and there, a light shining in a cottage window, and a sound of jolly laughter will arise to greet the onrush of the winds of death...The record of the human race makes strange reading. Sorrow has somewhat outweighed happiness in the balance of its fortunes. Ever and anon, its prospects have soared high, but only to crash hurtling down to earth again, and leave, as a memento of their rise and fall, a chasm of blank despair...And no doubt in every age there have been men who paused to look back across the years, and ask themselves:- 'In the name of reason, why all the pother and turmoil? What is the meaning of life? Is life worth while?' The answer...Mankind has been charged with the great task of blazing its own trail from the slime, where it wallowed in its own depravity, to the hill tops, where it will one day walk with god-like poise and dignity; and that so many of us now alive should be contented neither with ourselves nor with our institutions simply serves to show that we are fortunately still on the march...Perhaps the [Christmas evening church] bells are so melancholy because He knows how grievous is the suffering encountered during the blazing of the trail."

To return to less spiritual matters, the bulk of Kenneth Chesterton's comment in the Torquay Press was concerned either with dramatic criticism, or with affairs in local politics, and it was almost inevitable that he should become personally involved in organizing both these aspects of the local community. He was a leading figure in the community and was known to be interested in the theatre. Therefore, it was no surprise to find that when a group of citizens came together to form an amateur dramatic society in the town, they approached him with a view to his participation in the group. He agreed to attend the inaugural meeting and published an editorial

in the Times, suggesting that the town needed an amateur dramatic society.<sup>48</sup> At the meeting Chesterton was elected Chairman of the society, and a young school mistress, Doris Terry, became the Honorary Secretary. Fortunately there is a record of the events at this meeting. Doris Terry was later to become Chesterton's wife and during the late 1930s she wrote a novel, loosely based on events in her life, which contains a passage which she took from this meeting in 1930 and which she recalled as "almost word for word true, and K's manner of proceeding when president spirit is there!"<sup>49</sup>

" 'We must dare!' said the young priest, leaning earnestly across the green baize-covered table, 'we must dare to be highbrow. We must draw our line boldly, a line below which we will not go. And we must draw the line very high.'

The young journalist opposite him struck a similar attitude. 'How High?'

'Higher than Bennett,' said the priest... 'higher than Barrie, higher than Maugham, higher even than Galsworthy!'

'Who then among dramatists?' asked the journalist quietly, 'is reckoned worthy to be played by US?'

'For a start I should say Ibsen, Pirandello, Chekhov, Pinero, or perhaps Racine, or the Ancient Greeks.'

'No one at all from this tight little island?'

'Why yes,' the priest smiled condescendingly, 'we must include Shakespeare, of course, and perhaps' his 'perhaps' suggested a concession - 'perhaps Shaw.'

The journalist's scorching black eyes surveyed the personnel round the table, looking, it seemed, for something he could not find.

'If we start with a play entirely beyond our capacity,' he said, 'the society is damned from the outset. We shall be the laughing stock of the town, and rightly too.'

He did not soften his speech with 'In my opinion,' or 'I may be wrong but I think that -' He spoke as one having authority, and his fierce eyes dared the priest to contradict him. His mouth, however, was twisted in a humorous, slightly sardonic smile, which seemed to be taking the others into his confidence, asking them to agree with him that the priest was a bloody fool."

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"The priest smiled pityingly. 'Really great stuff,' he said, 'will always get over - even through the medium of the rawest amateur. It carries its own weight. Now only recently I produced Chekhov's Seagull with my choir-boys at a Parish Meeting.'

'I know,' the glare remained for the priest and the smile for the others. 'One of the youngsters from my office was sent to cover it. He told me he thought that the performance ought to be reported to the R.S.P.C.C. He still wakes up in the night laughing about it.'

It was now the priest's turn to glare. Christ in Heaven! Why had she invited these two men to meet each other? To hide her embarrassment Jane scribbled illegible things into her Minutes Book..."

If this exchange is anything to go by it would appear that by this time Chesterton was just as formidable in person as in print.

Chesterton's first major acting role in Torquay was not, however, with the amateurs, but with two professional actors in a production of Paul Raynol's play The Unknown Warrior. His professional actress friend Chloe Gibson had invited him to play opposite her in the leading role as the warrior. Although the part was exhausting, requiring long periods on stage and the learning of considerable passages of dialogue and monologue, Chesterton was so impressed by the message of the play that he agreed to take part.\* He was also assisted in the task of learning the part by his excellent memory.

Recalling Chesterton's wartime experiences and the fact that he was still wrestling with his conscience over the betrayal of

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\*The story is of a French soldier who returns from the Western Front to attend a bridal ceremony. But his leave has been stolen at a terrible price, for he has gambled his life in return, volunteering for a duty to be performed upon his return, which can only lead to his death. Chesterton wrote of the play: "this is no individual tragedy that is being enacted, but the tragedy of an entire generation condemned to death...it is due to one's social conscience to become acquainted with the play." Torquay Times, May 2nd, 1930, p7.



his battlefield ideals and those of his dead comrades, it is instructive to read the words of Mr L. Du -Garde Peach, the reviewer for Punch who watched Chesterton's performance:<sup>50</sup>

"Mr. A.K. Chesterton as the soldier wrought manfully, if not always quite successfully, with a world of words. It is an enormous part, demanding an enormous emotional range, and Mr. Chesterton's occasional emotional, and not verbal, hesitations are easily excused. His more frequent inability to articulate his words, especially in the more voluble passages is not: this is a fault thrown into greater prominence by the beautiful enunciation of the other two members of the cast. In his quieter passages he was excellent, in fact what I have called the occasional theatricality of Miss Gibson's performance, may be due only to the extreme naturalness of that of Mr. Chesterton. This and the obvious sincerity which inspired his playing of the French soldier make it something to be remembered with appreciation."

Extreme naturalness, indeed! What else could one expect from Chesterton in this role?

It was difficult for Doris Terry to have a proper relationship with Kenneth Chesterton during this period, because he was supposed to be married and "Mrs A.K. Chesterton" as she was always referred to, ensured by her mere presence that their relationship never became too close. But they did share one other pastime which enabled them to spend some time together - a love of walking on the wild moorland of Dartmoor. Doris takes up the story in her own words:<sup>51</sup>

"K. and I had a fixation on Dartmoor, both before and after we were married. We spent six consecutive years on holiday there, two in a lone gipsy caravan on a farm at Challacombe and the rest at a guest-house, the Old Parsonage, at Postbridge...we were never so happy as when we were on Dartmoor. K. said it was haunted by elementals. One had always the feeling of being watched and challenged. It was stimulating...(K. made a mental division of Dartmoor - North of the Princetown-Moretonhampstead road was the 'real' moor, South of it the 'pansy' moor).

Chesterton echoed these sentiments in his autobiography, recalling his favourite walk from Postbridge to Cranmere Pool,

via the water-course of the East Dart between Blackdown and Sittaford. The final part of the journey sees the infamous bogs: "become black viscous and naked, and...one's only means of going further is to hop from one shaking clump of heather to another. Here, one feels, is the ultimate desolation."<sup>52</sup> The very desolation of the moorland seemed in a strange way to relax Chesterton. In a fascinating piece of speculation Doris Chesterton has linked this to his African roots:<sup>53</sup>

"Kenneth had the soul of Africa in him. He always seemed like an African chief or potentate, surrounded by his people. He always preferred the village native to the town one, he saw urban surroundings as unnatural for Black Africans. He was deeply paternalistic towards them. But for Kenneth the greatest joy was to be remote from civilization. He almost worshipped nature on the grand scale, the idea of the primitive and the vast plains of Africa [and] The wilder parts of Dartmoor, with no sign of civilization in view."

In a piece written in 1927 for the Stratford Herald, Chesterton put these sentiments in his own words when dealing with the plight of the North American Indians:<sup>54</sup>

"It is not our shame that we shot the Indian in warfare but that we educated him in peace and then dispossessed him of his livelihood. If this is what Herbert Spencer meant by the survival of the fittest, then it were surely better that we should not belong to the fittest, so that we might die with sword unsheathed and a protest on our lips...It is a sad story which holds no palliative for the white man. There is nothing for him to do, if he must have a palliative, but to bury his head in the phrase 'the survival of the fittest.' But in that case he must needs find some definition of 'fittest' which is not applicable to the comparatively decent law of the Jungle!"

It was not that he desired to become an 'elemental' himself and a story told by both Chesterton and his wife underlines this point. While on a walking holiday with Doris, her sister and a woman friend, on Dartmoor, he succeeded in growing a ragged beard after two weeks without shaving. One day he was striding

across the moorland with a khaki cape slung across his shoulders and carrying a long staff. Doris remembered that by that time he had undergone a 'moor-change' - "He had identified with the place and I might have been moving around with an elemental."<sup>55</sup> On this particular day they had chosen to follow the Dart to Dartmeet (in the 'pansy' part of the uplands) and quite suddenly the little party, led by this tall (he was six foot two), gaunt, wild-bearded man, staff in hand and cape flowing behind in the wind, emerged in the midst of hundreds of day trippers sitting eating their sandwiches and talking loudly:<sup>56</sup>

"They were so shocked and silent that one could hear the East and West Dart meet. A prophet at least as eccentric looking as John the Baptist had come among them. If he had commanded them to repent and be baptised they would have walked into the waters forthwith..."

He was not, however, enamoured of his new role in society and Doris noted that: "One could at any time describe his eyes as smouldering, but that night they smouldered to some purpose."<sup>57</sup> The beard disappeared immediately upon their return to the hotel. It would seem, therefore, that on this occasion his sympathy for the elemental did not extend to being considered one himself. For while he considered the elemental a necessary and important part of human society, he did not deem it a sufficient ingredient to make up human civilization.

Further interesting light is thrown on this attitude by a piece he wrote for the Torquay press after the annual Times and Directory staff outing. In it Chesterton reflects on the dreadful isolation of civilized men incarcerated in the bleak isolation of Princetown Prison on Dartmoor:<sup>57</sup>

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"I fancy that...there was not one of us who did not experience a feeling of indescribable pity and horror at the plight of the wretched men serving life-sentences amidst the appalling loneliness of the moorlands. We saw some convicts pulling a roller across a lawn, all of them with listless mechanical gait that told of a complete surrender to circumstances, and an apathy more terrible than death. Three others were working near the road under the supervision of three ominous muskets. Two of them watched our progress with an air of interest, but without a gleam of intelligence in their eyes, the third grinned at us...That night I saw the same grin in my dreams and it was accompanied by the noise of a lost soul wailing in the dark. A little further on the road was a building marked 'Mission Hall', suggesting faith and hope to some; to others a compromise so pitiful as to be deemed a mockery."

This piece is also indicative of a range of attitudes held by Chesterton at this time which may seem surprising to those accustomed to reading his Fascist writings and viewing him as illiberal in such matters of crime and punishment. But in his pre-fascist thinking he reveals a greater humanity than might be expected. Witness the following extract from an article dealing with a sentence of four months hard labour passed on two young men for the crime of petty larceny and written in 1929:<sup>58</sup>

"It is the function of the law not to manufacture criminals but where possible to reform, and to give the accused an opportunity to make good. Imprisonment with hard labour for youthful offenders, so far from being a deterrent to crime, is more likely to embitter such, and make them join the ranks of habitual criminals...Justice should be tempered with mercy."

His commitment to human volition and individual freedom also placed him outside the normal category of reactionary thought, as can be seen in the following piece of conjecture about the morality of collective murder sanctioned by the state in a time of war:<sup>59</sup>

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"What almost all of us have failed to realize [is] that mass action, patriotism and the rest, do not absolve the soldier from the guilt of discharging his professional war-time duties. The individual soul cannot be handed over to a government. If an airman drops a bomb on a defenceless village, then his is the hand of the murderer! All the conservatism within us cries out against this notion, but if the conscience of the individual may be his own sovereign possession, then our rebellion is in vain. Furthermore, it is not inexpedient that we should lay this truth to heart. Governments will contrive to send us out upon wholesale murder expeditions until we say No!"

On the issue of patriotism itself Chesterton broke from the old Tory jingoistic tradition in no uncertain terms. Thus in 1929 he wrote in praise of Kipling in a manner which would not have pleased many of his orthodox conservative readers:<sup>60</sup>

"Rudyard Kipling rose to fame at a time when Britons had begun to suspect that they were duced fine fellows. His verses confirmed them in their suspicions... 'What do they know of England who only England know?' demanded Kipling scornfully, and the dear peoples of England repeated the line with gusto. they liked its rhythm.....the mood of national elation of which Kipling was the master singer has now mercifully passed away, leaving us sadder, though certainly a wiser people. Patriotism is one of the finest sentiments, but when it begins to swagger it becomes a disease."

In another article of the period he expanded this point:<sup>61</sup>

"It is true that patriotism means love of one's country, not because one's country is big, but often because one's country is small. The love of Englishmen for England must always transcend their love for that huge institution, the British Empire...But our pride in the Empire must not be a pride merely in the big battalions and majestic men-of-war.

Does the Empire strive to set an example of equity and fair dealing among men? Are its citizens devoted to the cause of culture and peace? Do they seek to serve rather than to exploit their fellow men? Are they ever on the lookout to advance the dignity of human life?

In so far as these questions may be answered in the affirmative, then the Empire is to be honoured and the spirit of Imperialism to be respected.

The patriotism evoked by thoughts of war is often the wrong kind of patriotism. Love of country must always be constructive love and must not seek to destroy."

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"The spirit of England is built not upon the tramp of armies, but upon the labour of poets and philosophers, and all those who endeavour to raise the stature of men.

In war time there is also a need for patriotism but it is not the raucous patriotism of the yellow press, but the patriotism of fine men modestly addressing themselves to a dreadful task.

The patriotism which in the end is of far greater value to mankind, however, is the patriotism which incites to high endeavour amidst the distractions which flourish in the times of peace."

Here is an excellent example of Chesterton's mature patriotism. It is a new form of sentiment (foreign to the pre-1914-18 ideals of popular jingoism and social imperialism) with its insistence that peacetime patriotism should not be reduced simply to pride in war-time conquest. Yet it is no less idealistic in certain respects, with the use of ambiguous words like 'equality' and 'citizens'. For Chesterton, like the Greek and Roman Imperialists before him, such words were restricted to those of the metropolitan culture, while the native peoples were expected to continue in their traditional ways of living under a regime of strict separate development. This would, of course, ensure their traditional way of life to some extent, but it would also ensure their poverty in the midst of increasing white plenty. But, since Chesterton believed firmly that 'civilization' was beyond the capacity of such peoples and could only harm them, it was a price he was more than happy to accept.

It is now necessary to turn our attention to Chesterton's involvement in the local politics of Torquay. From the very outset he had stamped his extrovert personality on local affairs, debating with local notables like Moffat Gautrey, and getting his own way with the plans for the amateur dramatic society. Soon after his arrival he had been involved in taking

over the rival Torquay newspaper the Directory, and in his first editorial he pledged that: "The Directory will be conducted on independent lines subservient to no class, sect, or party, but fair to all, and always mindful of the best interests of the glorious town in which we live."<sup>62</sup> Many of the leading citizens of Torquay must have looked upon this claim as underlining the previous position of the paper which had followed an orthodox conservative line. After all Torquay was Conservative (with a big "C") and at the 1929 General Election the Conservative's polled 38,027 votes against Labour's 5576. But such sanguinity was misplaced in this case, for Chesterton's radicalism tended to cut across traditional political boundaries and this allowed him to adopt a more independent line in his editorials. Moreover he actually considered himself to be a socialist at this stage in his life. He was also fortunate in that the proprietor of the Times Group, William McKenzie, fell in with many of his schemes and allowed his young editor the freedom to develop them.

One local issue dominated much of Chesterton's time in Torquay and that was the so-called "Tramways controversy", which began late in 1929, when the Highways Committee and local Tramways Company connived to rush through the Council a scheme confirming the Company in its existing monopoly for 42 years after the license renewal date of 1935. The Company were also to be allowed to replace the existing trams with trolley buses, thus maintaining their control over street lighting (which was attached to their overhead system) and also over certain rights of way. Of itself the controversy is of little interest, but at the time it raised

a great deal of local passion, not the least in Kenneth Chesterton's breast and it is therefore necessary to look at his reaction to this affair in some detail.

When he discovered that the full Council had only be given two hours to read the details of the proposed scheme before being required to vote on the matter, and that the public had not even been informed of its existence, Chesterton, outraged at this lack of consultation, published a highly critical editorial in the Directory. In it he suggested that: "It looks as though a secret plot has been hatched on this vitally important matter."<sup>63</sup> Chesterton then joined with a number of dissenting Councillors to form an Action Committee to fight the decision. After three weeks of ad hoc meetings and discussions a body emerged calling itself the Torquay Citizens' Defence League (hereafter referred to as the C.D.L.). It was in fact more than a single issue pressure group, constituting a full-blown forerunner of today's 'Ratepayers' Associations'.<sup>64a</sup> Their slogan was: "Join the Torquay Citizens' League and Possess Your Own Town."

Several Committee members had a military background apart from Chesterton and the rest of the group were drawn from dissident members of the Council. Chesterton published an editorial entitled "Long Live the Citizens' League," in which he pledged himself to direct all his energies to defeating the proposal and to extending local democracy in the town. Naturally such a stand brought him into direct conflict with many of the local notables who were quite satisfied with things as they stood. This is reflected in another of his editorials in which he hit out at the "established cliques in Torquay", which



he insisted were out to try and "smother" the citizens' movement.<sup>64b</sup> Indeed, he came increasingly to view his task as that of purging the Town of political corruption. Addressing a meeting of the League in March 1930 he made this very clear:<sup>65</sup>

"Referring to the work the League had set out to do [he] said that they were going to fight that appalling bargain in Parliament, and would not rest until it had wrenched Torquay from its ruling cliques (applause) and returned the Council to men of proved brains and ability and courage - men who would stand for the Welfare of Torquay and nothing else."

On the specific issue of defeating the Tramways Company and its allies on the Council, the C.D.L. was singularly successful. With the help of two other objecting bodies (Devon County Council and Paignton District Council) they succeeded in defeating the proposal both in the House of Commons and the Lords and, in a letter of thanks sent to Chesterton for publication in the Times and Directory, Colonel Hartt (the League's Chairman) concluded as follows:<sup>66</sup>

"Finally, sir, there are your own services, about which I know you will not allow me to say much. Your articles have had a most powerful influence on the campaign, and in committee you have proved yourself guide, councillor, and friend to the League, which will always remember your work with gratitude."

At a jubilant Second Annual Meeting of the League Kenneth Chesterton received a warm reception and was once again elected to the eight man committee to continue the fight for local democracy and a reduction in the rates. During his speech Chesterton made the interesting observation that his activities with the League had caused one detractor to remark that he was "the would-be dictator of Torquay."<sup>67</sup> This is indicative of the degree of resentment generated by Chesterton through his polemical incursions into this hitherto quiet political backwater.

Doris Chesterton recalled that: "Kenneth became a very powerful man in Torquay - he was always the core of a political tornado.." <sup>68</sup>

Inspired by the success of the League Chesterton stood as a C.D.L. candidate for the Babbacombe Ward in the local council elections of October 1931. He was supported by Councillor Darke Bennett who made the following singularly accurate remark about the candidate during a public meeting: <sup>69</sup>

"Mr. Chesterton has got a clear thinking brain and he knows just what is wrong in Torquay - he puts it somewhat emphatically at times, I admit, but he is the sort of man we want on the Council. (Applause)."

In reply Chesterton remarked that: <sup>70</sup>

"Last year Torquay went someway towards justifying one's faith in democracy, for it returned to the local government body such splendid representatives...I may claim with some pride that I played a part in the laying of these foundations, since it was either on account of my original suggestion, or on account of my final persuasion that these councillors accepted the fight...I use the military metaphor because by the very nature of things public life always involves something of a fight."

This, however, was a fight he was to lose. His opponent was one Isaac Pugh, minister of religion and sitting councillor for the Babbacombe Ward. Pugh eventually won by polling 963 votes to Chesterton's 834, a most creditable performance by the latter given his opponent's advantage as the sitting member for the Ward. Chesterton's defeat was also indicative of the general decline in the League's fortunes by this stage. In fact only two C.D.L. candidates were elected in the 1931 elections and by October 1932 we find Chesterton forced to address a meeting of the League on the subject of defections from its ranks by leading members: <sup>71</sup>

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Torquay Days.

AFTER THE VICTORY—Citizens' League



Leading members of the 'Citizens' League' celebrate in 1930. Chesterton stands smiling broadly.



Mr. A. K. Chesterton (Cardinal Pandulpho), Mrs. W. G. Spears (Cabaret Girl), Mrs. A. K. Chesterton (Lucretia Borgia), and Mr. W. G. Spears (in a gay costume)  
*Remington's Photo Service, Paignton.*

Amateur dramatics, with the mysterious 'Mrs. Chesterton'.



THE "UNKNOWN WARRIOR" Photos by Stuart Black.



A SCENE FROM THE PLAY

steeps beneath the Arc de Triomphe is linked imperishably with the Warrior in the Abbey." had been universally rejected, and who has very kindly shown his interest in next week's production by lending his

Acting with two professional actors in the "Unknown Warrior".

"Mr. Chesterton...addressed the meeting [saying that] the previous evening Councillor Mrs. de Winton and he had had an amusing experience when they had attended Councillor Granger Evans' meeting at Illsham. The first sight to meet their eyes suggested they had really stumbled upon a meeting of what might have been called a Citizens' League Old Boys' Association. In the chair was their old League friend Councillor Darke Bennett, and in addition to the candidate, there were present on the platform Alderman Johns and Councillor Richards, every one of whom was once associated with the Citizens' League...Summing up the position Mr. Chesterton said those members who found that the League stood fast for principle and that they could not always have their own way, now seemed to be conspiring against it to take their revenge."

This first experience of the inner workings of liberal democracy served only to underline Chesterton's estrangement from the very concept of Democracy. His South African background had ill equipped him to deal with the shifting sands of democratic infighting, and the failure of the Citizens' League to sustain even the support of its elite membership dealt an almost fatal blow to his briefly held optimism. Disillusioned by his experiences he retreated to the position expressed in an article for the Johannesburg Star in 1922, where he had scorned Democracy as: "scatterbrained in its infancy, vile and corrupt in its manhood, and a homicidal maniac in its advanced years."<sup>72</sup>

During his brief flirtation with democratic politics he had put forward on several occasions his own definition as to the criteria it should meet in order to justify itself as a political system. He rejected totally the practice so common among liberal democrats of ingratiating themselves with the electorate: "It is comic and distasteful...for an aspirant for political honours to have to woo the electors in return for their favours, especially since it is obvious that there can be no real sincerity...under such circumstances."<sup>73</sup> During the 1929 General

Election campaign he wrote bitterly that: "what we have not got, we expect to get - and we shall vote for the man who promises to give it! That is politics. It is also a scintilla of commonsense. The 'honest man' stunt is played out. There has been a plethora of 'honest men' during the election campaign. They are all so 'honest' so they say - there must be a difficulty in finding any knaves.."74

By far his most complete statement on the issue when he appeared as the proposer of the following motion at the Torquay Debating Society in February 1931: "That Democracy is revealing its worst qualities in the spectacle of present day government." One of his journalists was detailed to record the speech and the following debate for posterity.\*75

"The speaker sought to establish the fact that democracy does indeed rule and must therefore accept full responsibility for the entire spectacle of modern life the demos consisting of all classes in the community from the wealthiest to the poorest, and including the capitalist and the press lord, no less than the working man. This community - the demos - was its own king. For the purposes of his argument, however, Mr. Chesterton ascribed Kingship to each of the three main manifestations of democratic rule in Britain - King Tory, King Liberal, and King Labour. After pointing out the qualities which went into making a wise ruler, the speaker took each of his three kings in turn through the list, to ascertain whether they possessed these qualities.

The Conservatives stood for protection of wealth and privilege, and for a purely arbitrary standard of values which was upheld only with the help of illimitable snobbishness - one of the worst of human qualities. The love of Empire was mainly the individual's projection of his own vanity and love of power - equally dangerous qualities constituting a sort of megalomania. Moreover, the Conservative mind was fixed and unalterable, even though the times demanded above all things an open and flexible mind."

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\*It is instructive to pause here and reflect upon the importance of the fact that during his time at Torquay (and for much of the rest of his life) Chesterton exercised complete editorial control over his words, or, as in the case of the piece above, those who were reporting his words. This is important here because one can be pretty sure that the passage above really does carry Chesterton's original meaning and this is doubly important when, as in this case, we are attempting to understand the man's ideas.

"The Liberals also stood for protection of wealth... Conservatives with a social conscience, a flexible conscience it was true, but still a conscience. They were not prepared, however, to make any great sacrifices for their conscience, and if their altruism had gone to any lengths there would have been no need for a Labour Party.

Then came the turn of Labour. The speaker said that Labour was still largely untried, but even so he did not see any great signs of the vision splendid in the Labour Party's ranks. They too, were concerned mainly with the interests of one section of the community, and did not provide evidence of the intellectual disinterestedness which was of such paramount importance at the present day. On the contrary, Labour was often even more doctrinaire than the other parties, and more firmly committed to a system which might be a very much better system, but was still largely untried as a social and economic expedient, or rather, human nature was still untried on the vital point as to whether or not its frailties might not make the system unworkable.

Mr. Chesterton said he saw these parties as opportunists grabbing at party advantages of the moment and leaving the country to go to ruin as a consequence. In times of plenty the economic system could stand this constant clashing of interests, but there was no longer plenty in the land, and cooperation and fundamental detachment, and freedom from all kinds of lying and ignorance, prejudice and selfishness, were essential if final ruin was to be averted. The world was organized for cupidity and stupidity. These things had led to 1914. They had led to the equally grave conditions prevailing today. If sanity were to be restored to the country we should have to rediscover the ideal of service to the State, instead of making such gigantic efforts to snatch whatever the State may be able to give us. Moreover, this ideal would have to be allied, not only to commercial disinterestedness, but even more to intellectual disinterestedness. Shibboleths had had their day."

In this piece Chesterton is returning to his vision of a political system which would recreate the 'war socialism' of the trenches that he had experienced many years earlier. Thus while he adopts the orthodox liberal democratic line of nation before class, he is seeking to introduce the collective ideal of 'service to the State,' and complete self-sacrifice to the common cause of the nation. These were all sentiments that he was able to carry with him into Fascism. Given his somewhat idealistic approach to what democracy could achieve it is not surprising to find that in the debate that followed one

participant observed that: "what Mr. Chesterton wants, I think, as much as I admire his philosophic speech, is not a government of men at all, but a sort of government of angels!"<sup>76</sup>

It is also important to notice the degree of importance Chesterton attaches to non-sectarian politics, arguing for 'fundamental detachment' and 'commercial and intellectual disinterestedness'. In so doing he is suggesting that democracy itself is directly responsible for 'selfishness', 'greed' and the protection of self-interest, and by implication that it would be better to rule by the methods of kingship - the wise despot.\*

Finally his attack on the Conservatives is interesting as it illuminates his estrangement from orthodox, status quo conservatism, which he castigates as merely a cover for the protection of wealth and privilege. It also displays his contempt for *Tory Imperialism with its jingoistic self-satisfaction* and projection of the individual's "vanity and love of power."

The Tramways dispute focused Chesterton's attention on economic affairs, as from the outset he had opposed the scheme on financial, as well as political and social grounds. To him private monopoly was infinitely worse than public monopoly:<sup>77</sup>

"where a private undertaking has no competition to face it suffers no temptation to reduce fares, or run more often than is strictly necessary, or launch out upon a fresh enterprise, or worry in the least about the upholstery of its vehicles, or the civility of its servants...Under municipal control fares would be very much cheaper than they are today...by the elimination of a desire for large profits...I do not believe you will ever have a really good system as long as you have a private company running here solely for profit and which has not to face competition."

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\*In connection with this Cf., Chapter 5 below and the section on Chesterton's reaction to Shaw's play The Apple Cart.

It wasn't simply that he considered public ownership of a monopoly undertaking to be the lesser of two evils, however. Instead he was challenging "the old notion that official undertakings must necessarily be inferior in management to the undertakings of private enterprise."<sup>78</sup> This distinctly corporatist attitude was also congruent with his move to Fascism.

In a more philosophical piece he took issue with a Mr. Dobson who wrote to the Directory claiming that it was the duty of all 'individualists' to give their support to the Tramways company:<sup>79</sup>

"If his individualism means that he objects to public ownership of transport, then his objection must also extend to public ownership of schools, sanitation, roads, beaches, police forces, places of entertainment, parks, pleasure grounds, and a hundred other ventures which municipal governments usually run. But do his objections extend this far?...If it is right for a monopoly to control the roads, why should it not control everything else under High Heaven?...Besides how is the doctrine of individualism to be read into the perpetuation of a stranglehold which effectively rules out competition...By eliminating competition monopolies eliminate the individual far more effectively than collectivism. Individualism means the survival of the fittest in the business world, but monopolism only too often means the survival of the unfit by the protection of influential friends, and that is a very bad thing for the public."

Here we are at the very root of his conspiratorial mindedness. Monopolism is a corrupt form of Capitalism and where it cannot be avoided (as in a world economic system dominated by Jewish capitalists) the State must take control. On the other hand his support for non-monopoly capitalism is as strong as that of any orthodox Liberal or Tory of the period:<sup>80</sup>

"There is a great deal of talk about 'keeping up the standard of living', and trades unions are loudly protesting that come what may there must be no reduction in wages. It is true less wages means less money for the good of trade. But it is difficult to establish that if there is a fall in the cost

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"of living, and at the same time a declension in trade and its profits, the standard of wages must alone remain untouched... irresponsible talkers always end up with an attack on what they call the 'capitalist system', and yet they do not look past their noses and see that without capital there would be no trading and without profitable trading it would be impossible to keep up the 'standard of living'. They seem to think that the Nation has an inexhaustible and bottomless purse..."

Yet his pro-capitalism remained tempered by his attacks on monopoly capitalism and also by his advocacy of protectionism:<sup>81</sup>

"there is only one way out if wages are to be maintained, and that is to increase revenue and trade, and there is not much prospect of that so long as this Labour Government continues to adhere to the old Free Trade fetish and give work to the foreigner to do that might be done by our own workmen at home... Instead of helping our own trade and industries they seem to have money and credit to spare for the whole world."

This explain Chesterton's support for a speech made in Torquay by Oliver Baldwin, the Labour M.P. for Dudley in the West Midlands, and a typical tub-thumping Christian socialist and economic determinist of the period. The following extract from the speech gives some idea of his approach:<sup>82</sup>

"One day in March 1918, I was walking about No Man's Land... when I came upon a whole row of soldiers, dead upon the ground - obviously they had been machine-gunned. There was not a single hair on their faces. Looking at their badges I saw that they were lads of the Devonshire Regiment - sacrificed to the Capitalism which you people in Torquay are so proud to support... [In 1914] the Financial world realised that there was a chance of sorting things out if only they could have a war... Nothing was impossible to a people fundamentally wishing to change things, with a belief in their hearts that they were going to do something to bring about a more Christian state of things in the country... The secret of abolishing class humbug and hypocrisy was to give every child the same education as any other. They were fighting one thing, one evil, and that was the results of the Capitalistic system."

Not unreasonably, given the venue, Baldwin told his audience that these sentiments would find no place in the columns of the local "Tory" press. But he had reckoned without Chesterton's burning sense of wartime betrayal by what he saw as monopoly capitalism's support for the war. Consequently Chesterton not

only reproduced the speech in its entirety in the Directory, but gave it star billing as "Mr Oliver Baldwin's Magnificent Address at the Empire."<sup>83</sup> All of which must have caused consternation amongst the 38,027 residents who had displayed their Tory preference in the 1929 General Election.

Chesterton's support for the sentiments expressed in the speech highlight the close similarity between the economic determinism of some elements within the Labour Party and the conspiracy theory of those of the extreme right. The missing link between the two views is 'the Jew', who is held responsible by the far right for many of the problems of capitalism. This raises the issue of Chesterton's pre-Fascist anti-Semitism.

The earliest example of active conspiratorial anti-Semitism displayed by Chesterton came in 1918. He was in the Army of the Rhine at the time and heard of Cecil Chesterton's death in a military hospital in France:<sup>84</sup>

"Presumptuously, perhaps, I wrote a letter to Gilbert expressing the hope that his brother's fight against contemporary evils, especially the conspiracies of international finance, would not be allowed to lapse ...Answer came there none."

It is almost certain that at least some of Chesterton's anti-Semitic inclinations came from a hero worship of Cecil Chesterton which began as a child. After his first meeting with the two brothers in 1912 (when Chesterton was thirteen) he recalled that:<sup>85</sup>

"I went away with two heroes to worship, but in different ways, Gilbert, I reflected, was the genius filled with splendid dreams (and with such gorgeous humour in his poems and early novels), but Cecil was the man with his eye on the ball. Soon afterwards when Cecil's name became headline news because of his being prosecuted during the "Marconi Scandal" on a charge of criminal libel against Godfrey Isaacs, I became convinced that he was the man I must choose as my exemplar."

He also displayed his feelings in this regard when he visited G.K. in 1924 to seek an introduction to Fleet Street:<sup>86</sup>

"As we strolled round the garden of Top Meadow I felt impelled to return to the subject.

'Is anybody keeping a close watch on the Marconi Scandal crowd?' I asked Gilbert. 'They would not have had a moment's peace if Cecil had lived.'

Gilbert's brow puckered and he was obviously at a loss how to reply, when his small terrier came to the rescue with a diversion. G.K.C. gladly seized upon it...The occasion had passed — for ever!"

Given all this it is perhaps surprising how little Chesterton referred to the "Jewish Problem" and the "conspiracies of international finance" in his pre-Fascist journalism. Nonetheless, examples can be found, such as the following written for the Torquay Times in 1929:<sup>87</sup>

"Mr. Holland's indictment of the Victorian age chiefly centres upon the appalling money system that grew to such towering dimensions during the last century. [What he fails to see is that the].trouble started when the real hero of Waterloo came to London after his victory. His name was not, as you might think, the Duke of Wellington, but Rothschild. Thereafter the business was nourished by gentlemen of the same race, and of a peculiarly sinister genius, against whom the people of England were as defenceless as new born babes."

Another example can be found in his review of a film of the life of Disraeli, written in 1930, which contains an implied anti-Semitic critique of Disraeli's Englishness:<sup>88</sup>

"Then there was Disraeli's manner. That too, in the romantic sense, was English, but far more so than any Englishman could have contrived. Here perhaps is a glimmering of the man's genius, a chameleon that could finally out colour his environs. Before meeting Disraeli in the talking film, in fact, one had the uncanny sense of having met him in the pages of Wilde... Thus did Disraeli out English the English, and on the film at least it is all very charming."

Arguably, the most interesting piece on this subject written by Chesterton at this time, was his review of the work of the sculptor Jacob Epstein. Epstein had achieved unwanted

fame in 1925 when his commissioned memorial statue to W.H. Hudson, the much loved novelist-naturalist, was unveiled by Stanley Baldwin. It consisted of a flight of strange looking birds surrounding the female form of 'Rima', the wild genius of Hudson's Green Mansions. The work was vilified as unworthy of Hudson's memory, or even the park in which it was on display. The figure was attacked on several occasions (once with tar and feathers) and the portraitist John Collier described it as 'bestial' without noticing the irony of his word.<sup>89</sup>

Chesterton considered Epstein to be the greatest exponent of modern sculpture alive and this controversy caught his attention:<sup>90</sup>

"It is symptomatic of the general confusion Epstein's work has caused that people should vaguely identify it with frustration. This notion is the very antithesis of the truth, since the sculptor's inspiration lies palpably in the past, harking back to the ancient days when men were not afraid to express their ideas crudely as long as they expressed them strongly. Epstein's religion, indeed, would seem to be the worship of strength - strength which is truth, which in turn is beauty. He is a rebel against the pretty-pretty and the conventional..[his art]..tears its way through the smugness of conventional respectability and reveals mankind as naked and unashamed, and strong with the strength of the elder gods....A prophet and a priest - and an alien! The last title is the one upon which we must insist, for it is of great significance...Epstein, a Polish Jew, was born in a poor quarter of New York. These circumstances are illuminating, suggesting as they do a cosmopolitan cast of mind, accompanied by a certain starkness of imagination which is invariably its concomitant. Now a mind of this sort can exert a great influence for good upon British art, which does not always look at life with any marked crystal-clarity of vision, but the one thing it cannot do is identify itself with these things which are essentially British and, therefore, antagonistic to a cosmopolitan approach...Now 'Rima' is a creation of this distinctive British imagination, it belongs to our long and tranquil summer days, and no more lends itself to translation through a foreign personality than do most of Shakespeare's plays. Epstein's conception, indeed, is just about as satisfactory as Twelfth Night would be if rendered in pidgin English."

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"In the spheres of art which are not peculiar to a nation, and therefore not outside the province of a more universal genius, there is ample room for an artist like Epstein...here let him flourish. Here let his works proclaim that the ideas the thing. Here let the strength that is in him surge forward to its crowning glory - the smashing down of fake sentiment, and the creation in its stead of things that are durable as the spirit of man is durable.

We have no fault to find with Epstein in his domain; nothing but praise...We like it...that Epstein should have conceived the Christ as vigorous, alert, dominant, intellectual - an eternal world type."

The interesting questions raised by Chesterton's culturally specific views on art will be dealt with in the next chapter. For now it is sufficient to conclude from these pieces of pre-Fascist speculation on the Jews that Chesterton was at least informally anti-Semitic prior to his adoption of the Fascist creed; but that he was certainly not obsessed by thoughts on the matter. It would seem that it required his exposure to Fascist writings and association with other Fascists to turn his mild dislike and vague suspicions about the Jews into a savage critique of them.

While this chapter has dealt with many of his pre-Fascist attitudes - his lack of faith in democracy, his radical patriotism, his anti-monopoly capitalism and anti-Semitism and his visions of social and national harmony born in the trenches of the First World War - there still remains the question of the importance of Chesterton's literary and dramatic values and the way they conditioned and sanctioned his growing alienation from wider society. This is the difficult and important task of the next chapter. For no analysis of Chesterton's move to Fascism would be complete without considerable reference to the impact of these metaphysical ideas upon his thinking.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ADVENTURES IN DRAMATIC APPRECIATION

"Art for art's sake, divorced from the pulsating significance of life, leaves the soul barren and the mind full of shams...the essential meaning of art...is the provision of a vision of life."

A.K. Chesterton: review of King John, Stratford Herald, July 17th, 1925.

"In every spiritual attitude a political attitude is latent."

Thomas Mann.

One of the most important features of Chesterton's intellectual development from 1919 until he joined Mosley in 1933 is so far missing from the discussion. It is already clear that during this period he evolved many social and political attitudes congruent with his later commitment to Fascism. What is missing from the picture which has emerged is any comprehensive philosophy of human life and its place in the Universe, which might be capable of providing a pre-Fascist intellectual synthesis by legitimizing, sanctioning and conditioning his political and social ideas.

From the foregoing discussions it might be concluded that no such synthesizing element existed in his thinking prior, that is, to his acceptance of the Fascist creed, and that in his struggle against alcoholism and disillusion (physical and emotional forces which remained largely beyond his control during the period) he remained essentially agnostic in his spiritual values. After all, in the debate over the significance of 'Power's' message, Chesterton had claimed that: "our present destiny is to do the best we can with the present world...without worrying about what lies ahead, providing, of course, that the light of our conscience is not too dim to show us the way." He also claimed, however, that in seeking to accomplish the task of changing the world for the better: "we can develop our own characters, clarify our minds, help forward the good, resist the evil, seek out beauty..." But how did Chesterton define 'good' and 'evil', and what does he mean by seeking out 'beauty'? To look into these questions is to dig deep into Chesterton's innermost values and in so doing it is the metaphysical aspect of his thinking which reveals itself as the basis of these beliefs. For his personal aesthetic was

the vital component of his intellectual evolution which provided the core of his moral philosophy of life and which is missing from the investigation so far. In short, it was his literary and dramatic values which conditioned, sanctioned and legitimized his growing political and social alienation during this period.

In the Introduction\* I referred to the importance of Professor Fritz Stern's work in dealing with a similar phenomenon in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century German society, and in the persons of Moeller van den Bruck, Paul de Lagarde, and Julius Langbehn. Like Chesterton these men were more than mere critics of art and literature. They judged the spirit of an age, its politics, its very claim to civilization, with reference to its aesthetic achievements. Truly great art as they depicted it, was generated by, and reflected in itself, a great age and a great nation. This last point is very important since they, like Chesterton, were cultural (and therefore passionate political) nationalists, believing that German artistic creation was the greatest cultural achievement of any human society. By implication Germany represented the highest flowering of civilization, fitted to lead the world. Their cultural pessimism arose from a belief that modern Germany had lost its way culturally and therefore politically. In reaction to this perception they cast about for a solution based upon an imaginary past, in the hope of creating a utopian future and, in so doing, they instinctively reached out to embrace the politics of extreme reaction. Ultimately, they were seeking a great leader, who would combine

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\*See above, Introduction, ppxiv-xxi.



in himself (and his movement) the spiritual and aesthetic values of the greatest German artists, with the courage and will to action and power of the Teutonic Knights of old. As a result they proposed all manner of solutions - brutal, idealistic, anti-democratic, nationalistic and utopian.

For these men art, not science or religion, was the highest good, the source of truth, knowledge and virtue, since it was seen as based upon aesthetic values such as simplicity, subjectivity, self-expression, instinct and creativity. More than this it was rooted in ancient German culture and represented the true inheritance of the Volk. Thus, by looking at the lives and works of great artists they believed that they had discovered the true nature of the good society. Yet all this rests on one massive assumption - that knowledge drawn from aestheticism by metaphysicians could be directly translated into the analysis of complex social and political issues. In short, they denied that there is an epistemological gap (if not a break) between the two forms of knowledge, because they believed that they had discovered the 'truth' which transcended mere knowledge. It was an assumption shared by Chesterton. It led him into a similarly disastrous transfer of his literary values into the analysis of contemporary political questions and this explains his metaphysical, moralistic and thoroughly unempirical manner of dealing with such issues.

It was also made clear in the Introduction that because Britain lacked a Volkish subculture, there was little possibility of such ideas gaining any popular currency as was the case in Weimar Germany. Yet it is clear that the maelstrom of the First World War, coupled with post-war social and economic dislocation,

and the continued growth of mass popular culture, did have an impact upon several leading members of the British literary elite, pushing them into tacit or open support for Fascism. The ranks of such men include W.B. Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, D.H. Lawrence, G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Henry Williamson, Evelyn Waugh and John Buchan. Naturally their motives were mixed and there was an enormous variation in the degree to which each individual writer was prone to transferring literary values into political thought. Nonetheless the principle holds that they were all, to a greater or lesser extent, motivated by this phenomenon.

There is a significant gap, however, between these men and those studied by Stern. For he openly stresses that his subjects are literary intellectuals - interpreters of aesthetic creativity, and not writers of creative ability, let alone creative genius:<sup>1</sup>

"I chose these men not because their ideas were particularly original, but because their thought...demonstrates the existence of a cultural crisis in Modern Germany...they were more that the critics of Germany's cultural crisis; they were its symptoms and victims as well."

Perhaps because there was no comparable crisis in inter-war British culture, scholars dealing with the appeal of Fascism to literary figures of the period, or with the general intellectual response to the political crisis in liberal democratic ideals, have tended to ignore the possibility of finding a strand of cultural pessimism and idealism amongst non-creative literary intellectuals, educated in the English Classical tradition.

Thus, John R. Harrison, in his study of the attraction of anti-democratic and Fascist ideas to British literary figures, states clearly that he was motivated by a desire to learn why men of undoubted creative ability, culture and literary genius,

could so totally reject liberal political ideals.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, J.A. Morris, in his articles on Fascist ideas in English literature, also adopts a restricted perspective:<sup>3</sup>

"By 'Literature' I mean creative writing through essays, letters, speeches, etc., of a creative writer - D.H. Lawrence or T.S. Eliot, for example - will be regarded as primary material. But the speeches of, say, Sir Oswald Mosley - whatever one might think of his prose style - must be regarded as political, social, (even psychological?) material and not as literary evidence."

Alastair Hamilton, in his study of the appeal of Fascism to European intellectuals during the inter-war period, has little sympathy with the idea of seeking the cultural preconditions of Fascism. He states the absolute impossibility of discovering "undisputed forerunners" of Fascist thought in the 19th century, and denies that it is possible to prove that the thought of a writer could lead him "inevitably" to Fascism. Apparently this is a "dangerous fantasy" held by left-wingers and Fascists. There is a deal of the "straw-man" about this argument since it relies upon castigating those who would seek "undisputed" and "inevitable" causal connections in the quest for knowledge. Indeed, Hamilton has little time for causality in general, arguing that an intellectual's decision to back a particular political solution must be seen as "relatively disinterested", made in the hope that such a choice would make a better world possible. His conclusion is that the choice between Fascism and Communism was often arbitrary:<sup>4</sup>

"There were purely personal motives - caprice, affections, perversions. There was chance - the chance by which one man might witness the atrocities committed by the Fascists, while another might see those committed by the Communists. There were, in short, a hundred reasons: and there was no one rule that regulated them any more than there is any one rule by which we can judge them."

Perhaps so: but do we have to move from the obvious fact

that there was no "one rule" governing the move of intellectuals to extremist political solutions, to a position which suggests each case should be treated individually - purely on its own merits? Or should we continue to search for some pattern amidst Hamilton's diversity? Clearly Stephen Spender, in spite of the fact that he is writing the foreword to Hamilton's book, could not restrain himself from imposing a minor pattern on the results of this methodology. He begins, somewhat euphemistically, by suggesting that Hamilton's "objective way of presenting the facts provides a sufficient basis of judgement, where condemnation is required." He continues:<sup>5</sup>

"The men who are judged most severely turn out to be the inferior artists. Here, for example, there is a portrait of Malaparte which is damning enough. But the fact that men like Maurras, Ernst Junger, Yeats and Pound observed standards in their work which were independent of their politics, makes them tragically mistaken but does not affect their art."

This is interesting, because it supports Stern's assertion that we should seek the literary-intellectual shock-troops of Fascism amongst the less creative literary strata of society. Finally, Hamilton's work begs one very important question - why did the vast majority of British intellectuals who became estranged from the values of bourgeois liberal democracy in the inter-war period, opt for the Communist or Socialist, rather than the Fascist solution?

This will be dealt with in a moment.\* But first it is important to note that students of British Fascism have failed to study the academic leanings of the British Fascist elite. W.F. Mandle has undertaken the most comprehensive study yet of the leadership of the B.U.F.. Of the 103 leaders surveyed by him 51 had had a

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\*See below, pp153-4.

secondary education, of whom 33 had been to public school (he seems unaware that Chesterton attended a public school), 16 had gone to grammar school, while 8 had attended Oxford University and 6 Cambridge, with 10 from provincial or foreign universities.<sup>6</sup> But Mandle was content to rest satisfied with showing the fairly high standard of education of this elite and made no comment on the nature of their education, or their academic leanings.

Both Robert Skidelsky, in his work on Mosley, and Robert Benewick in his study of inter-war Fascism in Britain, devote a chapter to an analysis of leaders and followers in the B.U.F.. Benewick restricts himself to the observation that few intellectuals joined the party and repeats Mandle's figures on the educational background of the leadership.<sup>7</sup> Skidelsky is more forthcoming and in a clear passage puts forward a strong prima facie case for discounting the attraction of Fascism to any significant portion of the British intelligentsia, and in so doing he answers the question begged by Hamilton's work as to why most disaffected intellectuals moved to the Left rather than the Right:<sup>8</sup>

"It is a matter to record that the English intelligentsia which came to political awareness in the 1930s tended to be pro-communist...The reasons for this are complex and have only partly been explained. It was not nearly as true on the Continent where Fascism had a wide political appeal. This suggests that the phenomenon must be analysed in English terms. Perhaps the key factor was the weakness in England of non-liberal intellectual traditions...The completeness of England's Industrial Revolution left liberalism as the only significant intellectual barrier to Marxism (there were, of course, powerful non-intellectual barriers - tradition, deference, etc). Once liberalism was weakened by its association in the 1930s with the ugliest face of capitalism, Marxism seemed to be the only available alternative...By contrast, those intellectuals who did sympathise with fascism tended to be marginal figures."

This statement is substantially correct with regard to most sections of the British intelligensia, but it is more difficult to apply to those of literary inclination. For English literature, with its moral and intellectual elitism, could lead even its most profound thinkers into a reaction against bourgeois values which was diametrically opposed to Communism. Thus, while the advocacy of Yeats, Pound, and Lewis, for the application of bareness and a hard intellectual approach ruled by the authority of strict literary principles, achieved a vital stylistic revolution in English poetry and prose, when transposed into social and political principles it proved merely a spur to their disastrous support for Fascism. The same is true of D.H. Lawrence's spiritual aestheticism. For within English literature - from Shakespeare to Carlyle, to Lawrence and Shaw - there is support for the artist-hero as the morally superior political thinker and leader. As Harrison says:<sup>9</sup>

"It was Oscar Wilde who developed the idea that the beautiful contains a higher morality in itself, thus enabling the creative writer to assert his moral superiority. When the aesthetic enters the sphere of politics, he tends, as did Barres, to reject democracy and prefer a hierarchic system where the opinion and judgement of the mass should have no effect upon the rulers, whom, by virtue of their moral superiority, he would prefer to be creative artists. Thus is produced the concept of the artist-hero in modern politics."

If this was true for some of the greatest figures in English literature, how much more seductive must such a tradition have appeared to those lesser intellectuals of metaphysical training and inclination, who were also reacting against inter-war political developments.

There can be little doubt as to the potentially reactionary nature of such beliefs. Morris shows clearly that beneath the anti-democratic pronouncements of creative writers like Lawrence

and Eliot lay a fear that capitalism and its political instrument liberal democracy posed a threat to traditional aesthetic values.<sup>10</sup> Such creative writers shared a rejection of capitalism and liberalism as mass cultural phenomena which, they believed, would conspire to dilute, pervert and undermine British cultural achievements. Their adherence to the Classical traditions of English and European literature provided them with an alternative ideology, based on classical form, natural hierarchy, and tradition, which had never unconditionally accepted the values of liberalism. Thus, John R. Harrison, while accepting that English romantic writers of the nineteenth century never succumbed to the creed of political reaction so completely as did the French and Germans, nevertheless highlights the links between a "powerful anti-democratic trend of thought" in writers like Burke, Carlyle, and Ruskin, with many twentieth century writers, particularly Yeats, Lewis, Pound, and Eliot, through the agency of the 'aesthetic movement' of the nineties.<sup>11</sup>

As Morris puts it: "They were aesthetes fascinated by the best of past cultures and appalled by what they saw as the degeneration of western civilization into an age of mechanical barbarity."<sup>12a</sup> Professor Skidelsky, recognizing the fact that his explanation of the general disinterestedness of the British intelligensia in Fascism cannot easily account for the phenomenon of support shown by men like Lawrence and Eliot, seeks to absolve this group of complicity: "Such writers occasionally looked to fascism to defend civilised values against democracy in both literature and politics: more frequently they sought to defend civilization on the aesthetic and religious, rather than on the corrupted political plane."<sup>12b</sup> This seems, however, to beg the question, particularly as the 'civilised values' they were defending against

liberal democracy often led to a call for what Harrison aptly describes as "a cruel, authoritarian, bellicose, society."<sup>13</sup>

Thus, while Skidelsky is substantially correct in his insistence that the particular development of British political culture ensured that, with liberalism discredited, Marxism was the only significant intellectual alternative open to disaffected members of the intelligentsia, we simply cannot ignore the support for Fascism concentrated at the very top of the literary elite. It would seem that a training in metaphysics, even in twentieth century Britain, could lead one to oppose the positivism and rationalism of liberal orthodoxy, with an intellectual approach which, to paraphrase Nietzsche, scorns to deduce what it can divine."<sup>14</sup> An analysis of Chesterton's ideas in the period also indicates that we would be rash to discount the importance of cultural pessimism in provoking certain individuals involved in artistic interpretation into adopting the Fascist solution. In fact, both creators and interpreters of metaphysical values in the inter-war period were open to the suggestion that 'true' artistic creation was becoming submerged beneath the populist cultural outpourings of liberal mass society, in the absence of any significant countervailing patronage from an enlightened ruling class.

Finally, there is Professor Skidelsky's assertion, also substantially correct, that intellectuals who sympathised in Britain were, in the main, 'marginal figures'. Certainly Chesterton was such an individual, in the sense that his values cut across the development of his talents and because he was not an original thinker. But this marginality did not make him any less talented or able than most other non-original



intellectuals of the period. In his literary journalism Chesterton was capable of achieving a very high standard of writing, both in style and content. Consequently, if he was a 'marginal figure' it was largely due to his unwillingness to compromise his values in order to become a member of the 'establishment', rather than through any inherent defect in his intellectual abilities.

Indeed, a strong case could be made for believing that all inter-war Fascist elites contained a core of such marginal figures. The 'Fascist generation' was typified by the disinherited mind of the marginal intellectual all over Europe. Men like Jose Antonio Primo De Rivera, Drieu La Rochelle, Robert Brasillach, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, William Joyce and Alexander Raven Thompson all fall within this category. Further, even within Germany and Italy the inner core of the Fascist and Nazi elites contained very few intellectuals of more than 'marginal' status. As Thurlow has pointed out, the B.U.F. had, in Mosley, a leader of superior intellect to either Hitler or Mussolini,<sup>15</sup> and there is little reason to suggest (after allowing for the huge disproportion in size between the B.U.F. and its German and Italian counterparts) that Mosley's co-leaders were any less able than their continental opposite numbers. Indeed, Skidelsky has himself recognized this fact to some extent when he writes that:<sup>16</sup>

"It is often claimed that Mosley preferred to surround himself with mediocre yes-men so that his light could shine all the brighter in the surrounding gloom. This is, to say the least, a great oversimplification. At all stages of his career Mosley has captured the interest and support of remarkable individualists, and the B.U.F. period was no exception."

Professor Skidelsky's remark that only marginal figures of intellectual ability sympathised with British Fascism serves,

therefore, simply to underline the similarities between the Fascist phenomenon in Britain and continental Europe.

We must acknowledge, however, the dangers of overstressing the causal relationship between cultural despair and Fascism. Fascism was a complex political and social movement and such a concept can only offer a partial answer to the cause and effect sequence which lay behind its success under specific historical circumstances. Individuals like Chesterton did not chose the Fascist solution exclusively through the promptings of cultural idealism. After all intellectuals do not operate in a social and political vacuum and Chesterton was certainly no exception. It would be nonsense, for instance, to argue that his passionate nationalism, or his militant anti-Communism originated in metaphysical speculation. But what we can say with some degree of certainty is that these pre-existing values were conditioned and modified to a greater or lesser extent by his cultural values, and that this, in turn, both facilitated his move towards Fascism and ensured that Chesterton would develop a particularly mystical form of the Fascist creed.

In order to better understand Chesterton's ideas on drama it is necessary to introduce at this point the work of a man who influenced him deeply during this period - the Shakespeare scholar G. Wilson Knight. Knight became friendly with Chesterton during the latter's period as the editor of the ill-fated Shakespeare Review in 1928. Knight sent an article to the Review which Chesterton enjoyed immensely and later published (and which Knight later admitted was his first literary manifesto)<sup>17</sup> Shortly afterwards Chesterton published a second piece by Knight<sup>18</sup> and their friendship developed apace. Knight would travel to Stratford to

see the work of the Memorial Theatre Company and the two men would afterwards repair to the local pub to talk.<sup>19\*</sup>

Each became familiar with the other's works of dramatic appreciation and a mutual admiration developed between them. Three letters from Knight to Chesterton written between September 1930 and March 1931 make this very clear. In the first he writes that:<sup>20</sup>

"I think your command of wide human sympathy bodied forth in flashing phrases, and periods of strong style, quite unique. You ought to make a collection...don't lose your best efforts down the sink of anonymity - there's still time to catch them before they reach the drain!"

He also adds that he has "met very few interesting people" since Chesterton left Stratford. In the second letter he insists that he has:"for long thought that you write so much better than many high-sounding names of present-day literature."<sup>21</sup> While in the third letter he is even more fullsome in his praise:<sup>22</sup>

"You see, you have so powerful a style of thought, so well planted in human sympathy and 'reality' in the crude sense, that it often makes me jealous as it has the qualities I lack! - also it would find a wide appeal. The drama and high art and literature generally needs writers who, like Shakespeare himself, speak equally to high and lower brows! I mean, your essays are addressed equally to the highest intellect and to the average person: like poetry itself... You, so-to-speak, make literature out of the jostling experience of the world - there is no secludedness, no barren intellectuality: of which I am often afraid!"

Wilson Knight's opinion of Chesterton has not changed since that time. Interviewed in 1978 he recalled Chesterton's 1928 review of George Hayes' portrayal of Hamlet at Stratford as:<sup>23</sup>

"typical of the man's brilliant work - a lovely writing style, vivid imagery and a trenchant critique of orthodox opinion. The same can be said of his essay on Timon of Athens. He could have been a very great power in dramatic criticism if things had gone that way in his life and he had gained a position in the national press."

Chesterton's respect for Knight was equally great. After all

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\*Their friendship was brief as Knight left in the early 30s to take up a Chair of Literature in Canada.

he was one of the first critics to realise the importance of Knight's theories and to publish the articles of the, at that time, obscure Cheltenham schoolmaster. The appearance of Knight's seminal innovatory work The Wheel of Fire in 1930, drew from Chesterton a letter to Knight insisting, as he recalls, that: "I had added a new dimension to dramatic criticism,"<sup>24</sup> As final proof of his admiration for Knight's work Chesterton chose to dedicate his own book of dramatic criticism to Wilson Knight: "In Admiration."

But what was it about Knight's work and ideas that so attracted Chesterton and vice versa? To answer this is to prepare the way for a better understanding of Chesterton's literary values, for Knight, like his friend, displays a tendency to transfer his literary values into an analysis of political events. The actual content of his ideas is also interesting since this throws light on Chesterton's artistic values. It should be noted, however, that Wilson Knight's cultural idealism did not culminate in a wish to see Fascist political action. He lacked both the temperament and the life experience ever to have developed an interest in any specific political solution, let alone the Fascist alternative. His main attention was always focused upon dramatic and poetic interpretation strictly within the terms of reference laid down by the principles of artistic appreciation.

Nonetheless, thanks to the specific approach he adopted to interpretation and the fact that, like so many literary intellectuals, he retained a strong preference for his own cultural traditions, he was, on occasion, prone to straying into making political pronouncements on contemporary problems.

This was especially true of the 1930s and 40s during which he was aware of the problems faced by liberal democratic institutions in the face of economic collapse, war, and the competing ideologies of Fascism and Communism. Indeed, during this period it would seem that Professor Knight exhibited a mild form of cultural despair.

During the early part of his career Knight's chief preoccupation was with the development of A.C. Bradley's and Middleton Murry's earlier studies of Shakespeare's imagery into a new theory of dramatic "interpretation". This work (first outlined in Chesterton's Shakespeare Review in September 1928) relied upon the making of a radical distinction between dramatic "interpretation" and "criticism". Knight claimed that this was a natural development of Shelley's aesthetic philosophy as outlined in his Defence of Poetry.<sup>25</sup> The very word 'interpretation' was taken from that work, in which Shelley sees the interpretive faculty as the core of human artistic creativity and understanding.<sup>26</sup> In Knight's view an interpretive approach rejects the mere critic's attempt to view an artistic work within its social, historical and literary environment - judging the 'good' and the 'bad' elements in the work - and instead totally accepts the moral 'validity' of the 'poetic unit', tending to merge with the work under scrutiny.<sup>27</sup>

The full implications of this are far reaching, since they involve suspending one's normal moral judgements in favour of a purely aesthetic ethic. Thus, as Knight puts it:<sup>28</sup>

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"A person in the drama may act in such a way that we are in no sense antagonized but we are aware of beauty and supreme interest only; yet the analogy to that same action may well be intolerable to us in actual life. When such a divergence occurs the commentator must be true to his artistic ethic, not his normal one...Ethics are essentially critical when applied to life\*; but if they hold any place in art, they will need to be modified into a new artistic ethic which obeys the peculiar nature of art as surely as a sound morality is based on the nature of man...interpretation... must be metaphysical rather than ethical."

Knight linked this with a theory of artistic creation which he also claims to have developed from Shelley. This views the poet as employing his creative instinct, his imaginative faculty, which is irrational, in the sense that it cannot be controlled by the poet's willpower to produce a neat cause and effect sequence. Any attempt at deliberately didactic art will, therefore, fall short of 'true' or great art in Shelley's view, and Knight concurs.

This idea is now employed by Knight in the "interpretation" of works of great artistic creation. He argues that it is necessary to "work from the creative consciousness near to that of the creative instinct of the poet", and that as a result we must think less in terms of causality and more in terms of imaginative impact.<sup>29</sup>

Thus far the theory remains a somewhat radical, but strictly academic tool for the interpretation of great works of drama, poetry and literature. Arguably it was Wilson Knight's greatest contribution to English literary scholarship as he applied it so successfully to reinterpreting Shakespeare's works. However, in the wake of the rise of Fascist and Communist regimes in Europe and the advent

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\*Here Knight exhibits a sense of realism not found in Chesterton's work at the time.

of a war precipitated by opposition to Nazi territorial aggrandizement in Europe, Wilson Knight extended his Shelleyan concepts into the realm of political analysis with some interesting results.

His major statement was begun in 1938 and finally published ten years later and was entitled Christ and Nietzsche.<sup>30</sup> In it he was seeking to reaffirm Christian (as opposed to Church) principles, most notably the principle of love, through an analysis of the great works of European drama and literature. The work is a call for individuals to rediscover the "true path to Christ" for themselves. It is not based on a call for any direct political action, but rather upon a belief that political change must come from within each individual member of a political society. Only a group of citizens who have already experienced personal spiritual regeneration can hope to found the just political society. Finally, and most significantly, the book is infused with a sense of English literary patriotism, (in spite of Knight's obvious admiration for certain continental thinkers) and ends with a call for England to rediscover its poetic heritage in order that it may reclaim its rightful cultural (and thereby political) supremacy as the first among civilized nations.\*

Knight begins this work by affirming that it is not written in a didactic form, being founded rather upon "imaginative interpretations".<sup>31</sup> In short we must apply his interpretive method, suspending our normal social ethics in the process, in order to understand his message. This is followed by an exposition of

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\*There are, of course, many similarities in this attitude to that found by Stern amongst the German critics. Cf., p148 above.

the causes of his cultural and political discontent. He recalls the "communal inspiration" achieved by the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin during the inter-war period and suggests that liberal democracy "appears pale by comparison." Britain and America are seen as based upon the twin values of Christianity and democracy, the former subordinating the individual to Christ's communal whole, and the latter recognizing the rights of the individual in society. Knight now insists that Communism was founded unilaterally upon a paganized version of the former, while - "The Fascist-Nazi ideal with its emphasis on heroic values, its dramatic and humanistic assertions, above all its centralizing of the state in one person, the Leader"<sup>32</sup> - was derived from the latter. Meanwhile liberal democracy is depicted as having become directionless in both its recognition of individual worth and its commitment to Christ's communal teachings. As a consequence of this, in Knight's view:<sup>33</sup>

"We are seriously indecisive...we cannot remain content with such veering insight, with political philosophies which scamper differently with every gust of the European wind. Some central faith or trust is wanted, some depth of purpose, some intuition of destiny, something, however slight, with eternal authority; which being less dependent on our immediate troubles, can better prescribe for them."

The present political system in Britain, Knight argues, precludes: "our focusing any eternally dynamic truth, by which I mean symbolic, poetic truth." His point is that the political thinker should and must seek the "truth" by distending his mind to a more "poetic comprehension". For, in his view:<sup>34</sup>

"drama and indeed, all poetic literature, might be differentiated from philosophies and static theologies by its willingness and ability to tap and use those darker energies necessary to power of statement and power of personality alike."



In order to comprehend the full implications of this belief it is necessary to look at another work of this period - his revised version of the essay on Hamlet from The Wheel of Fire. In this piece he suggests that Shakespeare's handling of Hamlet's desperate situation and the problems that arise therein, plunges the audience into Nietzsche's realm of art, that is beyond good and evil, at least as understood in terms of everyday social ethics. Knight asserts therefore that: "All art is a means of relating the higher, beyond-thought, super-state to the lower, normal consciousness of society."<sup>35</sup> This is a vital definition which lies at the very heart of Knight's metaphysical morality. For the inference, surely, is that all true art, if properly interpreted (rather than criticised) on its own poetic terms, is capable of providing us with a truth beyond mere intellectual rationalism, and that such a message is buried in Shakespeare's Hamlet which contains a tragic dialectic of beyond good and evil<sup>a-</sup> morality.

It is important to understand what message Knight extracts by his method and also important to return to his Christ and Nietzsche to accomplish such an understanding. Here, after discussing the concept of the super-morality of non-didactic art, he concludes with the following observation:<sup>36</sup>

"You need not think the problems confronting Hamlet out of date; put international for personal action and we find ourselves similarly at a loss, equally inexpert, yet dominated by, the laws of blood and force...too many students of our day only look back, searching for 'causes', 'responsibilities' and intellectual error. I shall treat economics, psychology, theology, philosophy and history as existing in vassalage to the poetic imagination."

At root Knight seems to be suggesting a quite straightforward transfer of ideas from the play to the modern political situation.

But it is never really clear how one is to translate such truths into political practice. For instance, how does he propose that the politician utilizes the following message, also from Hamlet?<sup>37</sup>

"Where direct action becomes paradoxical, we are forced back on man's own inwardness, like Hamlet...like England during the last decade or so, he suffers from inferiority and self-criticism and suddenly, at the soliloquy's conclusion, falls back on art for his solution, the play to be performed before the King."

In order to underline the meaning of his doctrine that metaphysical knowledge holds all other forms of knowledge "in vassalage", Knight introduces the concept of two separate forms of metaphysical imagination, which he depicts as exemplified in the English and German cultural traditions. The German tradition is characterised as an attempt to "think poetry", and included in the vanguard of this movement are Luther, Hegel, Goethe and Nietzsche. Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra is considered by Knight to have been the apotheosis of this tradition. He informs us that through the works of these fathers of Germanic metaphysics, German philosophy has been working to render explicit what is already implicit in poetic art.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast the English tradition is seen as based upon a "succession of poet prophets," the greatest of whom were Pope, Shelley and Shakespeare. Knight contends that these two traditions have become unnaturally compartmented over the centuries, allowing Germany to slide into the Nazi abyss in an attempt to put German transcendental poetic philosophy into practice, while England relinquishes the ability to interpret the lessons of her great artistic tradition and so slips back

into effete decadence:<sup>39</sup>

"the average German can, therefore, appreciate Shakespeare better than the average Englishman: but they have produced no Shakespeare. They have got the soul without the body; the Dionysian without the Apollonian; the energetic principle, but not its created form...It is...no chance that our modern world's most perfect and comprehensive co-ordination of values and energies should have been born in England and that our most exquisite blend of doctrine and poetic imagination should have come from Germany. The German mind is more creatively aware than ours. England is not awake to her own, or any other nation's, poetic heritage. Great in half-conscious compulsions of a destiny her own sons often enough deride, she remained spiritually confused and imaginatively febrile...Britain remains most guilty, if only because destiny demands from her a cultural advance corresponding to her own poetic supremacy."

As the book draws to a close Knight presents us with another interesting lesson drawn, this time, from Timon of Athens.

He insists that the capitalist has inherited the political power formerly held by the feudal barons in the Medieval State, and suggests that Timon of Athens contains a message of wisdom for these latter day political overlords:<sup>40</sup>

"Shakespeare writes in a period when a time honoured feudal order was rapidly slipping away before a rising commercialism. He feels something of great worth and aristocratic value slipping away, while the acquisitive instincts, freed from traditional checks, wait to push mankind towards chaos... The play condemns no trivial system, but rather men, as individuals, incapable of handling private wealth, which is equivalent to personal responsibility and personal power. Indeed, until they are so capable, the far harder manipulation of international responsibility and power will remain beyond them, since a true regeneration can only come within, from a reversal, however distant and difficult, in personality itself...while personality remains socially rotten money theory is of no creative leverage."

We have come full circle to Knight's belief that the inner-man must change and affirm the true values of Christian love before any liberal democratic capitalist society can become morally, and therefore politically viable.

Towards the end of Christ and Nietzsche he states boldly that Shelley's Defence of Poetry, Nietzsche's Thus Spake

Zarathustra, Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, and Pope's Essay on Man, are: "The four pillars upholding my present effort towards a reconstruction of Christianity."<sup>41</sup> Thus:<sup>42</sup>

"Zarathustra's alternative withdrawal to nature and return to man, reflects both the life of Christ and our Western poetic history, of which the great archetype and precursor is Shakespeare's Timon of Athens...Nietzsche sees himself as delivering a new gospel at direct variance with Christianity. He is, however, dominated precisely as were Blake and Lawrence, by the tone quality of the contemporary Christian observance. He cannot see the New Testament as a daring super-moral taboo-smashing, book, as dangerous in its own time as it is in ours, but only as it exists to-day, its bright meanings smeared over by false sanctimony and its steely challenge blunted by twenty centuries of ecclesiastical attrition."

Wilson Knight is attacking the Christian decadence and capitalist greed of his time and points to certain great works of literature and drama as a way back to the sanity of the message of selfless love contained in the original New Testament.

The net result of this line of reasoning is to force Professor Knight well beyond his professional competence, into the realms of political prophecy. Indeed, compared to the sophistication of his methodology, and obvious knowledge of the texts, his conclusions seem naive, relying as they do upon a rather conventional series of patriotic assertions. For instance, his characterisation of the fulfilment of British Imperial ambitions is reminiscent of Chesterton's views on the matter:<sup>43\*</sup>

"Britain's expansion has been inherently both pacific and poetic, coming as Keats said of poetry, 'as naturally as the leaves of a tree', propelled less by force of arms than by a 'mighty half-slumbering on its own right arm'."\*\*\*

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\*Cf., Chapter Four,

\*\*\*Both men also believed that great poetry reflects a great age. Knight writes that: "Since poetry is, primarily, a statement of order, it is best born from an orderly age...the all important Shakespearian sense of dignity is closely related to the outer manifestations of an aristocratic age." Christ and Nietzsche, p221. For Chesterton's views see below, p187.

England, he insists, emerged from the Second World War seeming "decadent and effete, without the seeds of life", and yet he remains optimistic for national revival since appearances may be deceptive and "that nameless sovereignty running as a golden thread through our poetic heritage", may yet reassert itself. Next he turns to Nietzschean speculation on the forces for good that may be contained within seemingly unmitigated evil, suggesting that Hitler's disastrous rule may have been: "absolutely needed by the providential plan for the establishment of that world-order which Great Britain would never have herself dared so bloodily to inaugurate, but which, with her finer political insight, she and her allies may nevertheless be best fitted to conclude."<sup>44</sup> At root his faith in Britain as the supreme poetic nation remains unshaken:<sup>45</sup>

"The rough Johnsonian common-sense of England is not to be distinguished from her money sense and business abilities; nor from her pre-eminence in great drama; while both may be felt as included in her sense of political responsibility and that symbol of national integrity and imperial expansion, the crown...The King in England is, indeed, today symbolic of the superman-integration in its more communal reference, which he does not, however, claim as a man to embody, as did the German Fuehrer '. His presence asserts the indissolubility of individual and community which forces Shakespeare on from Prospero's island back to Milan and thence to the composition of Henry VIII."

This exposition of Knight's ideas serves as a useful introduction to Chesterton's metaphysical values. For what we have witnessed here is Wilson Knight's attempts to come to terms with the threat to his Christian values posed by mass capitalist society in crisis and the twin doctrines of Communism and Fascism. His great fear is that in Britain greedy commercialism on the one hand and competing materialist and rationalist doctrines on the other, have swamped the imaginative faculty of the people and thus precipitated national cultural and thereby political

decline. Meanwhile Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia have managed to maintain national self-awareness through a one-sided totalitarianism. Against this trend of the modern world Knight offers a rediscovery and reaffirmation of British cultural traditions, since he believes that only artistic knowledge can aspire to truth. Further, since his reading of the metaphysical message serves to convince him of British poetic ascendancy he remains optimistic for a revival, in spite of his despair over the contemporary situation. Thus, while his cultural pessimism is only a mild form of the phenomenon, it nevertheless represents a classic example of the transfer of literary values into the realm of politics, with predictably confused results. Consequently, Professor Knight's cultural sophistication contrasts vividly with his political naivety.

Chesterton shared with Knight this contrast between cultural sophistication and political naivety, brought about by the attempted transfer of values from metaphysics to politics. It is important to begin by establishing Chesterton's abilities as a drama critic, as an acknowledgement of his literary and journalistic talents clears the way for a better understanding of the man. Chesterton may have been a fool to attempt to view politics through metaphysics, but it was not because he was a poor critic that he did so. In order to demonstrate his abilities in this respect we need look no further than two pieces of Shakespearean criticism by him which were much admired by Professor Knight.\*

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\*See above, p159, for Knight's views of Chesterton's review of Hamlet.

The first piece was an appreciation of a performance of Hamlet at Stratford, with George Hayes in the title role. Chesterton began by praising Hayes for rejecting the presentation of Hamlet as a melancholic at the opening of the play, and offering instead "a Hamlet of the open air." This, he insists, clears the way for us to better appreciate that Hamlet is, in fact, a strong man, whose nature is curbed by the circumstances he finds himself in. He continues:<sup>46</sup>

"It had always amused me to read the opinion of the commentators who take Hamlet to task for his vacillation, as though changes in mind were a rare phenomenon in the world, and who rail against the delay in the killing of Claudius...Even the great critics, Goethe, Schiller and Hazlitt, and the rest, have not escaped a confusion of thought on the matter, for they have been at pains to point out that no man was less of a hero than Hamlet, by which they seem to postulate the superiority of brawn over brain - a pagan notion. Reflect for a minute upon the real conflict of the play. It is a conflict waged in the mind of Hamlet, so that if one is to talk in terms of heroism one must first decide which of the two warring sets of thoughts and emotions is the heroic set; in other words, which faces the greatest odds and aims at the greatest good. On the one side you will find supernatural influences, powerful in whatever way interpreted; tradition of vendetta still universally surviving; horror and nausea induced by a crime which continues to bear disgusting fruit in the relationship of Claudius and the Queen; and the thought of cowardice derived from the contemporary opinion on a man's duty towards his murdered father - a thought in itself sufficient to spur on a man of Hamlet's mettle. If Hamlet had succumbed to the onslaught of this formidable array of forces he would have taken the line of least resistance and murdered Claudius without more ado. The supernatural would thereby have been appeased, the tradition upheld, the nausea mitigated, and the man's self esteem cleared of any possible reproach on the score of cowardice. But Hamlet did not succumb - or at any rate, he did not succumb until Fate intervened to make further resistance impossible, and the length of the conflict was due to the well-nigh miraculous stand made by the two factors in opposition, instinct and reason - the instinct of a poetic temperament naturally antagonistic to violence and the reason of a noble mind which questions the morality of taking a life for a life, precisely as hundreds of thousands

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of people today question the morality of capital punishment, and precisely as almost the whole of mankind would fall a-questioning if they were themselves obliged to be the executioners.\* There can be no doubt, therefore, not only as to which side faced the larger odds, but also as to which side aimed at the greater good. The one meant the sustaining of barbaric tradition; the other meant the weakening of that tradition in the light of a prophetic vision. Out of such mental conflicts is civilization born, and in this particular conflict is revealed a pioneer of civilization, one of the race of heroes of which Akhnaton was the first. That Hamlet failed in the long run is nothing to the purpose, for what man would not fail against such a crushing conspiracy of circumstances?

The dogged resolution of the forces opposed to the vendetta give Hamlet's character its strength [which] finds supreme expression in the two terrific scenes [with Ophelia and the Queen...]. What was the real reason for Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia? Deep disgust of womankind, born of his mother's treachery? A contributory factor, no doubt, but nothing more, since Hamlet's mind is just. The need to banish love for the sterner purpose of revenge? Another contributory factor, perhaps, but again nothing more, since Hamlet's strength lies not in callousness or determinate cruelty, but in the capacity to keep his mind high and dry above the tumultuous storm of events. [Rather it is] a sudden shattering realization of her absolute inadequacy to co-exist with his sorrow... Hamlet's refusal to take the line of least resistance is nowhere more apparent than in this scene, where his suffering is so terrible that even the audience well-nigh swoons with a sense of Ophelia's unbearable tragedy... we are apt to let our concern for Ophelia outweigh our proper sympathy for Hamlet at this juncture. The man is down to bed-rock; his reason is fighting against stupendous odds; and in the hour of his most need he finds that the measure of Ophelia's understanding is but a thimble to hold the illimitable sea of his misery... So it happens that in the encounter of the intellectual giant and the feather-brained doll at the moment of supreme urgency it is the doll that breaks, while the giant strides on from one chamber of his inferno to another chamber. Here is tragedy if you like, my masters; and yet what other outcome would you have? Compromise is palpably impossible, and at the other end of the antithetical pole lies animalism and the dethronement of the mind. Believe it Hamlet is no weakling...

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\*This is another illustration of a remarkable anti-authoritarian streak in Chesterton's pre-fascist thought which was dealt with in the last chapter. It also provides a classic example of the way Chesterton transferred his aesthetic morality into social ethics, on this occasion with commendable results.



"The closet scene...reveals Hamlet as the agent of justice, relentlessly whipping the Queen into sensibility so as to pave the way for her atonement. Once again the hero undergoes ordeal by fire, and again he emerges steel-true to the transcendent nobility of his nature. Be the play upon Gertrude's nerves as fierce as the fiercest torment, we are not allowed to forget that the torturer, for all his dauntless resolution, is himself in the throes of the most terrible suffering...Hamlet's method of bringing his mother to her senses is also, I think, the method he would prefer to use with the King. The thought of the futility and waste of the traditional blood-taking is heavy upon him, and he would rather have the Gods appeased by the repentance of the criminal and the mitigation of the crime through the deliberate renunciation of its fruits."

Chesterton concluded this tour de force with some additional suggestions for the actor playing Hamlet. He suggested that Hayes had achieved:

"a highly intellectual portrayal, but its intellectual content derived its strength at the expense of the actor's emotional resources. The part was interpretive rather than realistic; thought rather than felt. Had Mr. Hayes contrived to get more completely into the character; that is, had he been able to combine the presentational and representational methods instead of concentrating on the former, I have no hesitation in saying that his Hamlet would have been one of the biggest things ever seen on the stage...A case could be made out, I think, to show that Hamlet's sorrow had passed well beyond the point of paroxysm, but however that may be I venture to suggest that a good deal more mental anguish can be encompassed in a slight tremor than even in the most distempered of agues."

It is, perhaps, salutary to reflect upon the fact that Chesterton had left Berkhamsted at the age of sixteen with little in the way of academic distinction to his credit and had received no structured tuition since that time. His powers of self-education must have been considerable (although his public school would have fed him the classics of English and European literature in spite of himself). In this context it is important to recall Doris Chesterton's comments, reported in Chapter Three,\* that he had read widely from an early age and possessed

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\*See above, p78.

an extraordinary capacity to recall information which had been assimilated. Indeed, in a recent interview, Mrs Chesterton recalled that: "One night after we had spent the entire evening reading Macbeth together, he recited the entire play in bed asleep! I kept waking up to find him still at it."<sup>47</sup> Such factors had, it would seem, allowed Chesterton to develop his own intellect; although, as we shall see, this process of self-education left him open to the failings shared by almost all self-made men in that he was seldom reflective or questioning of his own beliefs.\*

The second piece worthy of preliminary note for its obvious grasp of the text and for its challenging interpretation of the play, is Chesterton's Address to the Stratford Shakespeare Club on the ethics of Timon of Athens<sup>\*\*</sup> He began ironically by asserting that, as Shakespeare was not an ethical writer, there are no ethics that we would normally recognize as such in the play (a view which places Chesterton firmly in agreement with Wilson Knight) "so that I have been set to expound a Timon's banquet and expound a thesis on a non-existent subject." His argument is that since the message of the play unfolds in a non-didactic manner, the ethics must be extracted by the audience since they are not directly resolved by Shakespeare. Having established this distinctly 'Knightean' methodological point Chesterton opens his discussion with an assessment of the main character Timon - the man whose absolute love for his fellow men and their temporal world turns to absolute hatred of both

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\*This was a characteristic which Stern highlights in the German critics. Cf., Introduction, ppxvii above.

\*\*Delivered on April 22nd, 1928.

when he is betrayed by his 'friends' in his hour of greatest need:<sup>48</sup>

"The worldly wise will call Timon a fool, and a fool he was in so far as he lived in a fools paradise. Kindlier critics will say, perhaps, that he was weak, and weak he was in so far as he did not survive the usage of the world. Still more generous critics may insist that he was noble, and noble he was in so far as, when disillusionment came there was nothing mean or small or spiteful in his hatred and no single thought of revenge in his mind. If he wished for the destruction of his fellow men, it was not to satisfy his outraged feelings, but simply because his intense loathing prompted him to believe that they should be exterminated for the sake of the purer products of the earth...Timon's grand and terrible consistency places him well beyond the verges of our pity, and if we are to have any feelings towards him at all; that is, if we are to regard him as anything but a lay figure fashioned to register the reaction of a great nature to the treachery of friends, then I fear we must view him with stern and uncompromising hostility, for we are of the world and he was our enemy...Timon allows himself to be carried away in the full flood of his emotionalism, and will not pay life the compliment of bringing to its observation either his eye or his brain [and] when the crash comes, as come it must, he perceives the real rottenness of the planetary system of which he has so contentedly been the sun; and mistaking the rats he has gathered around him as human beings, he goes to the wilds, to inveigh against the whole of mankind. Health does not lie this way. From a sublime lack of thought Timon rises to a crest of perverted thought rarely reached by man, so that he goes to his grave without ever knowing what manner of place was the world he had inhabited, and without ever knowing what manner of beings were the fellow creatures of his habitation. In this later state, when the poison of misanthropy has eaten into his soul, Timon is certainly a terrific and monumental figure, more compelling by far than when he was supplying the life-blood of the community which he was afterwards to confound to all eternity; but what I wish to stress is, in both states, he is essentially a figure of colossal self-indulgence. Thus, in the days of his exile, there is bitter disappointment in his heart when he discovers in Flavius an honest man; which makes it clear that prior to his servant's arrival he had been sustaining his soul on the belief that the world held none. Extremes are the very essence of his existence, and herein lies the whole tragedy of the man. When he began to use his eyes they were out of focus from long disuse, so that he viewed the phenomenon of existence as it might appear in a distorting glass. When he began to use his brain, it was twisted by an obsession amounting to positive mania, so that every phrase

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that fell from his lips rang out with all the wild hyperbole of madness. Timon was born, and Timon died, but Timon never lived...and here I venture to suggest is an ethical principle of the first magnitude. Life without thought is an evil thing, be it never so well intentioned. Timon of Athens teaches us that if we do not use our critical faculties constantly we not only rust or perish ourselves, but more often than not we send others to their perdition. Let us take heed, therefore, should we have anything of Timon of Athens in our composition, that we give neither our worldly goods nor our mental or spiritual energy to others without discretion, lest we have to answer, when the last trumpet sounds, for the lost souls of men turned parasites. Let us, on the other hand, be on our guard that we accept no gift or favour which we cannot lay to our hearts, lest we become excrescences on the earth's surface like Lord Timon's courtiers. At the same time let us beware that we give to the reason no unlicensed sway over the emotions, lest we become an Apemantus, and our usefulness to this wonderful world shrivels down to the point of a scorpion's tail."

He ends by underlining the revolutionary intent of his text, avowing that "revolutionary theories are provocative of thought, and I firmly believe that in this world and in the world to come, it is with thought that the ultimate victory lies."

Having thus established Chesterton's credentials as a first-rate drama critic (and whatever we may think of his specific interpretations, we must surely agree that in terms of knowledge of the texts, style of presentation and theoretical consistency, he is impressive) it is now necessary to turn our attention to the manner in which his literary ideals and interpretations interacted with his social and political beliefs to provoke his espousal of the politics of cultural despair.

In turning our attention to Chesterton it is important to realise that he shared three literary heroes with Wilson Knight - Shakespeare, Shelley and Swinburne. In Blame Not My Lute he recalls that by the time he reached Stratford the first two had long been his heroes and he chose some lines from Swinburne to preface his important review of Journey's end.<sup>49</sup>

But there were some vitally important differences in life experience and temperament between the two men. Chesterton was a man of action and a journalist as well as a drama critic. Wilson Knight, on the other hand, had always been an academic far removed from political action and he was seeking change through the agency of individual spiritual regeneration. He also lacked Chesterton's radical estrangement from liberalism and democratic institutions. As a result of these differences Chesterton's cultural despair was mixed with a profound political, social and racial radicalism - the former providing an important spiritual sanction for the latter. Chesterton's work is also characterised by a tendency to mix a profoundly idealistic optimism with his cultural pessimism to produce a very peculiar combination.\*

We can see something of this if we look at the earliest examples of Chesterton's literary writings which appeared in the Johannesburg Star in 1922. The Editor obviously felt that this raw young journalist had something important to say, because he allowed him space beside the editorial itself, to write an occasional column on matters of general philosophic interest. The result was an interesting series of articles loosely (and significantly) held together by the theme of 'spiritual regeneration' in the face of cynical pessimism. Together they form a kind of early literary manifesto.

In reading extracts from these articles it is as well to bear in mind that they were written in the period leading up to

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\*In this context perhaps Eric Bentley is correct when he suggests that: "Extreme optimism is closer to extreme pessimism than it is to any intermediate view..", at any rate when the dividing line between 'optimism' and 'utopianism' becomes blurred. Cf., Eric Bentley: The Cult of the Superman, London, 1947, p98.

Chesterton's involvement in the 1922 "Red Revolt", at a time when he must have been under some considerable stress. The article which set the tone for the whole series was entitled "Cheerio 1922: An Attack on the Cynics."<sup>50</sup> (this is heavily ironic since it was written on January 2nd, 1922) and in it Chesterton reveals his radical optimism. He begins by denying that simply because 1921 was a year of failed resolutions in South African society 1922 would necessarily prove similarly disappointing. Agreeing with the dictum that man is a creature of time he adds the thought that he is also the master of this dimension, for "time provides the opportunities for events, but it is we alone who shape these events." Finally, he suggests that providing an individual is "at peace with himself," that is, free of pessimism, cynicism and "dreadful ennui," then all temporal difficulties can ultimately be overcome.

On its own the piece would have had little significance, except to show Chesterton's passionate optimism in the face of what was after all a pretty grim period in South African history. But he chose to develop his ideas in the subsequent article with some very interesting results. This next piece was entitled "Towards the Dawn", but the subtitle is far more significant: "A Plea For Culture."<sup>51</sup> Characterising the age in which he was living as "reactionary", "most miserable, despondent and most confused", "this is indeed the age of stygian darkness", he moves on to list the failures of organized religion, art (which is depicted as in the throes of a "cruel nightmare"), and philosophy ("torn into a million different isms."). The blame for all this is placed squarely at the door of education

by Chesterton. It seems that education is lacking in both form and content, and ill suited to educate young people to deal with the many problems which will face them as adults in a complex modern civilization (here Chesterton's unpreparedness for the reality of war must have been at the back of his mind). He now offers a solution to the problem which deserves close attention:<sup>52</sup>

"the troubles of the world are always at bed rock spiritual troubles, and can only be cast away by men developed in the idealistic as well as the practical sense.

At present there is too much concentration on facts and figures and too much detail given to logic...[People educated exclusively in the rational scientific manner] are in too close a touch with the material reality and, not having been trained, they are unable to draw upon the reserves of poetry and imagination which are stored up in their souls and which alone are able to smooth the cruel and hard outlines and give understanding to knowledge.

Undoubtedly what is required is less practical and dreary analysis and a greater attempt to build up a broad historical and philosophical synthesis. Our scholars must be prepared for life as a whole and not as hitherto, for only part of life; they must acquire culture as well as knowledge...After all it is difficult to see why a compromise should not be reached between the idealist and the materialist...It is the fashion nowadays to hear a man deride the things of the soul, and such a profound and elemental thing of the soul as art and poetry. [Such a person] does not realise that however practical he is...he has somewhere latent in his soul a veritable ocean of poetry... [So let the teachers] be men of the loftiest culture and steeped in psychology, the greatest of all the sciences. Then in the school room let us have... less fact and more fancy, less repression and more expression, less dogma and wider speculation, fewer catch-words and more enlightenment. Let us have music to express the half expressable, let us have poetry, intelligently learned and beautifully recited, let us have the picturesque the fantastic, the inspiring, the soul stirring...Then and only then shall we turn out an optimistic race and not a race of cynics, then only shall we be armed for the encounter against "Weltschmerz", the dreary haunting spirit of world-sadness and then only shall we find the material and the spiritual blended in perfect harmony."

Now we know what Chesterton meant in his autobiography when he said that during this period it was his desire to "live with aspiration". The plea for conditioning scientific knowledge

with aesthetic understanding and the assertion that only poetry and imagination can give "understanding to knowledge", is reminiscent of Wilson Knight's view that: "All art is a means of relating the higher, beyond-thought super-state to the lower, normal, consciousness of society." So too is Chesterton's suggestion that art and poetry are "profound and elemental" parts of the "soul".

The third article, which completes the theme, appeared after a gap of several weeks and was headed: "A New Morality: Dipping into the Realms of Ethics."<sup>53</sup> It opens with an attack on the general distrust of innovation and change shown by ordinary people in the spheres of science and morality. But it is Chesterton's discussion of morality which is of interest. Characterising accepted moral standards as largely bankrupt hypocrisy he argues that in spite of this they are allowed to overwhelm "the stupendous work of genius." Indeed, when the forces of conventional morality and genius do clash it is always genius which is defeated, "although it is a flaming beacon of truth and the other a smouldering mass of lies." Thus, Chesterton views genius as the real guide to progress. After all, what, he asks, has the ruling morality achieved?:<sup>54</sup>

"It has punished the criminal instead of curing his disease and destroying the conditions under which it can be contracted; it has valiantly discountenanced war and reaped it in abundance; it has preached social liberty and brought economic slavery in its place. This is about the sum total of what it has done, if we leave out of our reckoning that most hideous of all its indiscretions - the bearing of that idiot child Democracy. Democracy, scatterbrained in its infancy, vile and corrupt in its manhood, and a homicidal maniac in its advanced years."

Apart from providing clear evidence of Chesterton's early estrangement from democracy, it is quite clear that the form



of morality under attack here is bourgeois liberal in character. But who are these figures of 'genius', fitted to rise above the effete decadence of bourgeois ethical standards? In answering this question Chesterton reveals himself as a supporter of the concept of the artist-hero in politics:<sup>55</sup>

"And still we talk ecstatic nonsense about our moral standards, deaf to the other voices that ring cheerily in our ears - the voices of our poets, who have looked into the eternal soul of the universe and listened to the melodies of the spheres: the voices of our thinkers who have caught a glimpse of the divine reality and the sanity of all things; our mighty geniuses, who have felt the pulsating heart of nature and registered the healthy vigour of its beat. Were these glad voices to be heard, were their inspiring messages to be understood, we should soon tear into fragments the futile fabric of our lifeless morality and build up a new one built upon fundamental truths. Then would our poets and our psychologists be made our legislators and not our lawyers and wool merchants; then should we crown our Shakespeare and our Havelock Ellis, not our gloomy Dean and Mrs. Grundy."\*

The message running through these early articles is very close to that developed later by Wilson Knight. He clearly believes that only metaphysical knowledge can aspire to 'truth', because it exists in a soul-state close to divinity. Thus, if mankind wishes to improve its lot both economically and politically it must select statesmen who consider their profession an art in the most literal sense and who therefore draw inspiration from the lives and works of the great artists.

This was a similarity that was to grow, especially after he had become friendly with Knight, although because his ideas

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\*The choice of Havelock Ellis as a first rate thinker is most interesting. He was a pioneer of British sexual psychology and his works were used by homosexuals and lesbians in the inter-war period to aid their case against repressive laws. He was also one of the first and most important informed popularisers of Nietzsche in Britain. Also of great interest, he was an early socialist and helped found the Fellowship of the New Life, with several future leaders of Fabianism. His personal brand of socialism was moral and cultural and he stated that: "We socialize what we call our physical life in order that we may attain greater

were already well advanced before he met Knight in 1928, there is no way of judging the exact degree of influence exerted

by Knight upon Chesterton's thinking. Nonetheless, the ideas expressed by Chesterton on the epistemological importance of poetic understanding in a series of articles for the Torquay press in 1929, are too close to Knight's views for us to ignore this influence completely.

The articles were given the collective title of: "Essays in Literature",<sup>56</sup> and they contain some of his clearest statements of metaphysical belief. The first essay, entitled "Truth and Poetry", dealt with the anti-rationalist nature of poetic knowledge. He began by stressing that: "there are verities in the emotional sphere which are able to confuse black and white or otherwise play havoc with matters of literal fact, and still remain triumphant truths." Poetry, he suggests, looks at life with an "inner-eye", which is "the gateway to the soul", and enables it to explore truths "so delicate and subtle that they appear at variance with the actuality of things perceived on the physical plane." Thus, the poet operates in the "domain of the soul", and that which he expresses "is not the semblance of truth, but its very essence." These assertions are very close to Wilson Knight's belief that artistic creation achieves 'truth' because it transcends social ethics with a metaphysical morality, creating truth from what would otherwise appear a-morality.

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[continued] freedom for what we call our spiritual life." (Cf., David S Thatcher, Nietzsche in England, Chapter IV, University of Toronto Press, 1973.) Unfortunately Chesterton never returned to this theme and so there is no way of knowing the significance of Ellis in his thinking.

In the next piece, entitled "On the Back of Pegasus,"<sup>57</sup> Chesterton moves even closer towards Knight's position, suggesting that in order to understand poetry one must suspend one's normal critical judgement and adopt a perspective from the back of Pegasus, as the fabulous celestial steed crosses the heavens of universal truth, whirled clear of earthly materialism and rationalism. Indeed, the materialist, we are told, is ever denied such horsemanship, because his feet are so firmly planted in the "clogging" clay of positivism and rationalism, which prevents him from rising to such "heightened consciousness", which is the poet's offered knowledge. There are very close parallels here with Knight's view that the interpretive faculty must be utilized if truths are to be revealed in great works of art.

Chesterton also adds an interesting idea that, although poetry is high art this does not mean that it seeks to soar disdainfully above the phenomena of the everyday world, since: "Unlike the empty-headed snob who looks down on his fellows from the eminence of some fancied superiority...the poet wishes nothing more than to be passionately identified with his fellows, since it is only by knowing and loving Man that he can come to know the Son of Man." This is to draw a Christian-Humanist sanction to the poet's craft, a fact made clear in the final lines of the article. Here he argues that if one accepts the challenge of attempting to achieve a heightened consciousness through works of great poetry: "you will come at last into the presence of God to find that he is Mankind at its highest potentiality for good, and hear the melody of the spheres,

to discover that it is but a human voice speaking in kindness and love."

The third essay dealt with "Some Purposes of Poetry"<sup>58</sup> and begins with the interesting assertion that it is "to reduce all sensation to thought and all thought into expression." In the light of this Chesterton conjectures that when mankind reaches its "ultimate destiny" it may be discovered that "the only real and enduring truth is that which formerly was held to be no more than idle poetic fancy. It may well be that after all we find the only life to be the life of the spirit, and all else the phantasmagoria of an unquiet dream."

His next move is to divide poets into three (not necessarily mutually exclusive) categories, namely - intellectual, imaginative, and sensuous.\* He places poets like Donne and Browning into the first category, while Shelley is presented as a classic example of the second. No actual poet is placed in the third group. It is apparent that he considers the imaginative poets to be the most important since:

"they would do no less than resolve the Universe into terms of thought, winging their way to the boundaries of immensity and returning with a complete chart of the spiritual world, and man's soaring destiny therein...these are the poets who explore Heaven and Hell, and who write of their explorations in a riot and reel of inspiration."

This falls little short of his claim for all three orders of poetry which together:"range across the entire universe of thought and feeling, and the record of their wanderings constitutes a complete history of the human spirit." It is

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\*Such a classification has some similarities with the psychologist C.G. Jung's four 'functions', which he considers are used by all individuals in various combinations to orientate themselves with the world. These are - sensation, thinking, intuition and feeling. Cf. Frieda Fordham:An Introduction to Jung's Psychology, pp35-46.

interesting when reading these thoughts to set beside them the thoughts of Moeller van den Bruck when he wrote of art that it is "the signpost to the path that leads to the ultimate truth", "We already possess an art...which renders religion superfluous and which embues every modern man with the same confidence in the universe...which in other times only faith in God could provide."\* Chesterton was, perhaps, less atheistic than this, identifying confidence in the universe with a faith in an unknowable God, but apart from this the parallels are obvious.

The final article was entitled "Poets of Pain",<sup>59</sup> and in it Chesterton sets out to demonstrate that: "It is the lot of the poet, no less than of God, of whom he is the prophet, to be eternally crucified upon the earth." Thus, Shakespeare's tragedies "were not born of detached and fanciful flights of imagination", but rather from a comparable torment in the author's soul. He lists the tortured life histories of great artists like Keats, Coleridge, Wilde and Beaudelaire, and suggests that it is quite wrong to declare that they were worthless men simply because they contravened the accepted rules of morality in their private lives. For their work is transcendent of all such considerations and, in part, grows out of such personal torment. They record their encounters with both good and evil in "language which is deathless" and this places them well beyond the verge of normal moral judgement. There is a distinctly Nietzschean feeling of 'beyond good and evil' about Chesterton's argument, but no mention is made of

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\*Cf., Introduction, pxvii.

this source by Chesterton in any of his writings of the period.

He concludes the piece by asking his readers to reflect upon their own moral values in the light of his argument:

"for what is evil in the sight of the virtuous and the hypocritical, and is fit only for their castigation, is quite another thing for the doers of evil - it is eternal pain; pain which leaps and bounds, and maddens and aspires, and tortures and kills; but pain, pain eternal, pain, eating into their very hearts; and setting their senses screaming with all the intolerable anguish of the ages. We should be very careful, you and I, how we judge this thing which we call evil, and which is eternal pain to the evil-doers, for it is bound up with the destinies of so many poets, so it is bound up with truth and beauty, and the ultimate mysteries of the soul of God."

In all this Chesterton is sharing in a European-wide tradition of thought which found its deepest roots in German society, as the following passage from Stern's work shows:<sup>60</sup>

"That art was the highest good of a society, that it had a sublimity and timelessness which no other human pursuit possessed, that it could soar to the highest form of truth, and that it should be a teacher of man and a guide to morality - these had been beliefs that had originated in the Sturm-und-Drang period,\* in that first marvellous outburst of liberated genius that later generations still sought to emulate. Accompanying this apotheosis of art was a solicitous concern with the artist, with his life, his struggles, his genius. Quite apart from his creations, from his ability, in Carlyle's phrase, "to read the open secret of the universe," the artist was thought to personify the human condition, to embody the quintessence of man, at its most violent and intense, and no theme is more characteristic of modern German literature than the struggle between the artist and the Philistine."

While Raymond Williams suggests that in Britain during the 'romantic period': "Art came to stand for a special kind of truth, 'imaginative truth', and the artist for a special kind of person, as the words artistic and artistical, to describe human beings, in the 1840s, show. A new name, aesthetics, was found to describe the judgement of art, and this, in turn, produced a name for a special kind of person - aesthete."<sup>61</sup>

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\*By this Stern is referring to the period of high German romanticism. Cf., Stern, op cit, p278.

That Chesterton was working within this tradition of English romanticism, under the direct or indirect influence of men like Carlyle, Wilde, Shelley, and Swinburne, is made doubly clear in his views on Shakespeare. In 1926 he published an article in the Stratford press entitled: "Shakespeare's Detachment and Modern Progress".<sup>62</sup> Not only does this reveal his neo-romanticism, but also it highlights the way in which his love for Shakespeare, and his dismissal of much modern drama, intersected with his concern about the state of contemporary society.

He opens with the claim that Shakespeare exhibited an almost "supernatural" power of detachment in his work, which must ever confound the "casuist" who seeks the final 'truth' about any character or situation. Chesterton is claiming that Shakespeare was counsel for both sides in the conflict of morals and never attempted to pre-judge the issue for the audience.

This Olympian detachment is seen by Chesterton as bringing Shakespeare into conflict with "certain modern intellectuals", a conflict brought about by the difference in the characteristics of the two ages. There follows a somewhat idealised picture of Elizabethan England, "the calmest as it was unquestionably the freshest period in the history of England," apparently even its wars were little more than "glorified tourneys". It was an age which allowed more room for the expansion of a man's individuality. Setting aside Shakespeare's "immeasurable superiority of genius", Chesterton argues further that modern society prevents writers from gaining even the semblance of

artistic detachment, since it:

"cares no longer for the expansion of a man's soul, but drives him ahead of his years, fixes him, standardises him, and hides his personality amidst the scurryings of the anonymous mob. Man, the king of the earth, has abdicated, and become one of the countless pawns in the grim game of life which is being waged by invisible players who have made the world their chessboard.

While the supreme value of human life is now accepted by all, Chesterton continues, "the other theory about the supreme value of the human soul now strikes us as mediaeval and meaningless." This, in turn, has allowed modern man to evolve "a belief in unbelief", and has resulted in the obliteration of the "old clean cut divisions...the old inflexible dogmas", now "submerged in the quagmires of compromise." Thus, in the absence of any meaningful organised religion, "the children of men are born into the bondage of doubt as surely as their forebears were born into the freedom of the faith." Therefore, "in the intellectual sense, people no longer believe, as the Elizabethans believed, that knowledge is something ultimately and triumphantly attainable; the problem now is whether any part of knowledge is as much as digestable...as this suspicion gains strength, so does the conviction <sup>that</sup> some... [overall] comprehension is becoming one of the fundamental necessities if man is to continue the civilized mode of existence." In Chesterton's view it is this search for a rational overview of society and its future which forbids modern writers detachment, since they must now hurl themselves as partisans into the fight against "the strange and nameless forces of the future." He has little sympathy with this (supposedly) modern preoccupation with sectarian metaphysics, since he claims that it rests on the assumption that: "the individuality of man must be left to mark time for a space,



while genius goes forth to try and survey these torrents and devise neat little schemes for damming the waters and leading them along canal-routes to irrigate every part of the utopias they have invented for the habitation of mankind."

Most at fault in this respect, in Chesterton's opinion, are H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. He castigates Wells for his doctrine of "the supposed continuity of progress running through history from Asoha to Aristotle and thence to Roger Bacon, Galileo, Newton, and Darwin, and finding its apothoesis in Mr. H.G. Wells." Especially galling to Chesterton is Wells' suggestion (in his Outline of History) that Shakespeare added little to the "world's totality". His response is predictably hostile:

"Had Shakespeare given mankind a fresh heresy over which it might wrangle, or disputed the course of the sun, or invented the aeroplane, or a penny-in-the-slot machine, he might have secured a place in the halls of Mr. Wells' immortals: but... he only reflected the vast life of man and inspired and delighted all the generations that have since come upon the earth..."

Turning his attention to Shaw's "dogma", which he interprets as meaning that "all great art is didactic", Chesterton's reply is equally dismissive:

"Shakespeare is thus ignored and G.B.S. then proceeds to put the world right by evolving a race of supermen - "a sort of good looking philosopher athlete" - to whom he has graciously permitted the right to inhabit the earth as soon as he has disposed of the present tenants - those ludicrous little humans who so offend his sense of order by being human."\*

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\*Chesterton misunderstands Shaw's intention. For Shaw the great poets are seen as 'musicians' and the useful poets as evangelists. In his Dramatic Opinions and elsewhere, Shaw insists that Shakespeare is a 'musician', that he has no message and is not philosophical. Therefore, Shaw insists, we must not look to content abstracted from form if we wish to find the source of his greatness. Shaw was exceptionally conversant with the works of Shakespeare and had as his principal purpose in assailing him the laudable motive of discouraging the bardolatry of Victorian critics and actors. Cf., Eric Bentley: Bernard Shaw: A Reconsideration, Second Edition, New York, 1976, p98.

Against these "rationalists", Chesterton evokes the works of his famous second cousin G.K., "writing novels in which he very convincingly contrives to get the rationalists locked up in lunatic asylums and endless articles in which he clamours for a return to Catholicism and the decent guilds and chivalries of the past." Not that Chesterton is about to adopt his relation's Catholic alternative as his conclusion shows:

"Of course, we shall never return to medievalism any more than we shall (pray heaven) advance to the utopias of Mr. Shaw. Something more durable will have to emerge from the melting pot, and mankind may undergo much travail, and pass through a million weary madneses before it comes once again upon the road to the central sanity of things. But when the road is at long last discovered we know who we shall find in the van of the pilgrimage, and it will be neither Mr. Brittling nor any sort of good looking philosopher athlete, but a certain Warwickshire man who carries no didactic pointer and who happens to have nothing in his pockets to add to the world's totality!"

Chesterton later amplified these points in an article which appeared in the Shakespeare Review, entitled "Some Modern Criticisms".<sup>63</sup> Here he claimed that Shakespeare "was the greatest thinker of this or any other age", and further insisted that was because he "looked at life not from the angle of any pet theory or prejudice, but with the detachment of a god." His strength as a philosopher comes, therefore, from the fact that he:

"did not pigeon-hole his observations, label them according to the requirements of philosophic jargon and deduce them from equivocal 'laws' which form the subject of violent controversy until they are finally countermanded...it is to the imperishable glory of Shakespeare that he was no didactition:his works will endure because of their truth, and their creator will always stand in the same relation to professed philosophers that life always stands to any theories of life, because the truth of both is much greater and comprehensive."

Final clarification of Chesterton's views on this subject can be found in his introduction to the address on the ethics of Timon of Athens:<sup>64</sup>

"It cannot, I think, be too strongly urged that Shakespeare was not an ethical writer...he knew too well that humanity was too vast and too complex to be rationalised by any intellectual specific or panacea...This does not mean, of course, that Shakespeare's plays are lacking in ethical content, but simply that the inner meaning, the central verity, as it were, must be unravelled by the individual reader, and interpreted by him in terms of his own mentality. To deduce a moral from his works is as easy, or difficult, as it is to deduce a moral from the workings of nature. Shakespeare delved deeply into the human heart; he explored every recess of the human mind, and with the vast store of knowledge gained from these investigations he was able to plead eloquently as "angels, trumpet-tongued" for each separate mood, for each impalpable emotion in the gamut of human feeling. He was counsel for every warring factor in man's life, but he was never more than counsel: he never aspired to the gown of ermine, he never sought to judge."

Variations on this theme can be found scattered through the works of writers like Carlyle and Wilde, and, indeed, Knight. Thus, we find Carlyle, in his essay on "The Hero as Poet",<sup>65</sup> writing that:"Shakespeare's Art is not Artifice; the noblest worth of it is not there by plan or precontrivance. It grows up from the deeps of Nature, through this noble sincere soul, who is a voice of Nature." While Oscar Wilde, in his tract, "The Critic As Artist"<sup>66</sup> writes that:"People sometimes say that actors give us their own Hamlets, and not Shakespeare's... it is a fallacy...If Hamlet has something of the definiteness of a work of art, he has also all the obscurity that belongs to life. There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholics." Finally, in his Christ and Nietzsche, Wilson Knight suggests a thesis very close to Chesterton's position:<sup>67</sup>

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"There is didacticism in both Dante and Shelley unlike the serene objectivity of Shakespeare...That Shakespearian spirit of love and wide acceptance which refuses a partial didacticism...We can see how a comprehensive teaching may grow from that very poetic spirit which refuses the limitations of didactic art, with moral categories not denied but dissolved into a more metaphysical message..."

This doctrine, as interpreted by Chesterton, produced the pieces on Hamlet and Timon of Athens which were reviewed above. It also provides the foundation of the following appreciation of Julius Caesar as a refutation of Shaw's 'attack' on the Bard: 68

"Can Mr. Shaw tell us whether Shakespeare was glad because of the assassination of Caesar? We doubt it. Can he tell us whether Shakespeare's sympathies were with Brutus or Antony? The great names have us all in thrall, and naturally, perhaps, we are inclined to favour Mark Antony, the friend of mighty Caesar. Most theatrical companies pander to us here by making Antony heroic and Brutus rather a villain. Yet both, in their ways are heroic\*. Caesar is mighty after his death, he pursues and confounds the conspirators. But there is no sense of a vile crime to be expiated. Brutus and Cassius die by their own swords, it is true; nevertheless, there is nothing to suggest that a moral is being drawn, or that a conspiracy of any sort or from whatever motive must of necessity bring Nemesis upon the scene. The device of the ghost is borrowed from the old Greek tragedy which centred upon the murder of Agamemnon, but not the moral lesson. If villainy was the cause of the deaths of Brutus and Cassius, what caused great Caesar's death? Virtue?"

In another review of the period, this time of a performance of Richard III at Stratford, Chesterton makes an observation on Shakespeare's handling of the personality of the King which parallels that made by Wilde about Hamlet: 69\*\*

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\*Later in life Chesterton revised his position on this issue, taking a more critical stance towards Shakespeare, but maintaining his basic position: "I think it should be remembered that Shakespeare was a poet and a dramatist, not a moralist. When he does pass moral judgements he sometimes goes wildly off the rails. (For instance, after unconsciously depicting Brutus throughout as a canting hypocrite and prig he ends up with the 'noblest Roman of them all' nonsense." Letter to Hilary Cotter, Box 276, Grand Centre, Alberta, Canada, July 10th, 1972, pl.(Xerox copy of this letter sent by Mr. Cotter to the author.)

\*\*See above, p191.

"To dismiss Richard as a cold-blooded murderer would be to do his personality a wrong, and to do an even greater wrong to Shakespeare's genius, which has woven into this personality a vastness that compells a more intelligent appreciation of its essence. The tragedy of Richard is the tragedy of himself no less than it is the tragedy of his victims...Richard born of an evil destiny, marches helplessly forward to an inevitable fulfilment."

Thus, in the manner of Wilson Knight, Chesterton's dramatic criticism was an attempt to achieve an 'interpretive' understanding of Shakespeare's works. He totally accepts the validity of the poetic unit and adopts a metaphysical moral stance, replacing the search for causality with an attempt to present the imaginative impact of the work. He also believes that in so doing he is able to translate the message of 'truth' buried deep within the text. Thus, it is hardly surprising to find in the preface to his book of dramatic criticism a justification for his approach with a distinct flavour of Knight's interpretive methodology about it:<sup>70</sup>

"The writer's aim has been to concentrate briefly upon the spiritual essences of the plays worth seeing on account of the inner glow which they induce in the mind. The interpretation of these essences, in his view, is the only thing in dramatic criticism that counts."

Before drawing conclusions on these issues it is necessary to assess the impact of modern drama upon Chesterton's ideas. He was, of course, dismissive of the more partisan works of writers like Shaw and Wells; indeed, in his condemnation of most contemporary drama he was often dismissive, holding it up to an unfavourable comparison with his great hero:<sup>71</sup>

"The dramatists of today are clever men, they dissect and vivisect every motive in the human mind for the edification of psychological audiences, but do they understand mankind as Shakespeare understood it before ever the psycho-analysts walked the earth?"

Yet, in spite of the reticence and lack of sympathy shown by Chesterton towards much contemporary work, he was attracted to the works of certain authors, most notably Sherriff, Shaw and Noel Coward. Sherriff's influence was largely confined to eliciting Chesterton's admiration for having so successfully recaptured the spirit of the trenches. But Coward and (more especially) Shaw, exerted a much more profound influence upon Chesterton's thinking in this period of his life.

Coward appealed to Chesterton because, like his contemporary Evelyn Waugh, he was a member of the bourgeoisie who was always ridiculing the failings of his own class while extolling aristocratic virtues. Two plays of his had a particular effect on Chesterton - Home Chat and The Queen was in the Parlour - both dealt with bourgeois hypocrisy, while the latter also extolled the virtues of aristocratic values.

Home Chat dealt with social misunderstanding and scandal in High Society London. A young man is stranded in the corridors of an overcrowded Continental train during an overnight journey, and is invited by a friend whom he meets on the train, a young married woman, to share her compartment. There is an accident and those at home become aware of the events with predictable consequences - everybody jumps to the 'obvious' conclusion and Coward exploits the situation to poke fun at bourgeois morality and double standards in inter-war Britain.

The work is essentially light-hearted and frivolous, but in his review of the piece Chesterton treats it very seriously. He opens by suggesting that the play is an attack on the "Victorian survival" of an ethical belief which insists that so long as appearances are maintained morality is in the

ascendant and all's well with the world, "no matter what rottenness may lie beneath the surface." Thus the Victorian moralists (or moralizers) could assume that as long as conventional appearances were maintained, their smug self-satisfaction and false piety was well justified, while the merest hint of unconventionality induced in them (and in their inter-war counterparts) "a still more enjoyable glow of indignation and outrage."

Chesterton considers this a deplorable attitude and expresses his disgust in no uncertain terms:<sup>72</sup>

"Now the girl's invitation to her friend to join her in the compartment was the only sensible and decent thing for her to do. That is a statement which I expect every intelligent reader to endorse. Otherwise I shall be inclined to ask: 'What in the name of sanity is the use of morality if it is only strong enough to operate when supported by a set of rigid conventions?' - or, alternatively: 'Why worry at all about the morals of the human race, if its members are so contemptibly flabby that they can only be trusted to fulfil their requirements when they conform to certain formulae dictated by other people?' There are greater things in the world than mere appearances; there is the living spirit of the truth, and there is also the living spirit of freedom. The only morality which is worth a moments consideration is the morality of truth as opposed to the morality of half-baked bondage to tyrannous and nasty-minded rules. If Mr. Noel Coward's function in life is no more than to get people to blow their intellectual noses, then I think that it is indeed a graceful and an exalted function to discharge."

But the righteous indignation provoked by this work pales to insignificance beside the effect Coward's The Queen was in the Parlour had upon Chesterton. For this work seemed to summon up in him the deepest moral and political instincts and emotions. His review begins with the highest praise:<sup>73</sup>

"it is more than a work of art: I would say definitely that it is a great play, and greatness is built up of sterner, more enduring stuff than the music which is made of the sighing wind and the spirit of 'ah lack-a-day.' Drama is only to be achieved by a threat to something very valuable in human life: in other words, there must be a war of contrasts, so that

continued/.....

"whatever the author's intention, if he has done his work properly, the memory of those contrasts will remain with us long after the curtain has been rung down, fixing our minds upon the great perennial problems, and leading us to re-assess our values in accordance with the dramatist's vision of life as it is lived, or can be lived, by the sons and daughters of men. Viewed in this light, the play under review is seen to carry on the author's attack upon the contemporary world, and it is with this attack that I am here mainly concerned."

The plot of the play revolves around a princess of royal blood of Ruritania. She marries a tyrannical aristocrat who, fortunately for her, dies leaving Nadya to run wild in several European capitals, going from one disaster to another until she finds true love in Sabien, a young commoner. On her wedding day she learns that a series of fatal accidents have placed her on the Throne. After much soul-searching she agrees to renounce Sabien and do her duty for her country. After a year a husband is chosen for the Queen and while awaiting his arrival she is saved from an assassin's bullet by an unknown young man in the assembled crowd. *The future King arrives and all seems well.* It is arranged that the young man who saved the Queen's life should be presented to her. It is, of course, none other than Sabien!

Chesterton's reaction to the story thus far is to display a genuine awe of the royalty of Kings and Queens and their devotion to duty above all else. After the attempted assassination he praises Nadya's composure as an indication of "the tradition of the blood." While in the scene between the Queen and her chosen King he is moved to suggest that:

Over/.....



"we are accorded another glimpse of royalty as it exists away and beyond the reaches of ceremonial and rhetorical usage. Two strangers marrying against their heart's desire, because the marriage lies upon the highway to their duty! The Husband Elect is also of the race of Kings, and between them the two show us how superlatively exalted a thing life can be. In their mere discussion of their situation they seem to carry existence to the stellar places, where dwell the poets and the conquerors, 'those so fair', who have made this sublunary world immortal with their presence."

During the following scene between the Queen and her true-love, it transpires that Sabien has endured all he can withstand and he announces his intention to end his life on the morrow. In Chesterton's words: "There is one night between the day and the morrow.....The young Queen, because she is great, consents."

The denouement consists of a rebellion of the populus, which is quelled by the Queen, in spite of the fact that it is her past moral 'indiscretions' that have so provoked the crowd. Chesterton is contemptuous of the 'mob'; the attempted assassination, he tells us: "was one of many straws in the wind which indicated the virtuous disapproval of her past which the dear demos took good care to nourish in its heart. It was so important." He describes her speech of reconciliation to the people as being "as full of contempt as ever Coriolanus poured upon the Roman rabble."

The Queen is successful and with her husband's added words, she transforms the crowd into a patriotic gathering to celebrate the monarchy who sing the National Anthem. Meanwhile a shot is heard to ring out in the Queen's private chamber and Sabien finally restores peace and order to the kingdom by his ultimate sacrifice.

There now follows a quite remarkable interpretation of the play's message and significance by Kenneth Chesterton. Returning

to his initial point about the "war of contrasts" necessary to achieve true dramatic art, he suggests that:

"The contrasts to which I referred will now plainly be seen: on the one hand is the moral worth of the Queen, passed ten times through the crucible: on the other hand is the bourgeois misconception of that worth, and as the outcome of their dramatic clash this misconception is scorched and shrivelled, and left a poor, and broken, and rather horrible little mess beneath the grate where flames the triumphant fire of human effort. It is not that morality is being attacked but simply the bourgeois misconception of morality, which distorts every value, and fails to see that the aim and crown of this spiritual product is not a mere unchanging waste and sterility of the imagination, but the emergence of God in man triumphant over every other vital urge in his nature. Here is a woman displaying character in action such as the world sees but rarely, revealing an intrinsic strength which must surely be numbered among the claims which justify mankind's hope for eternal life, and all that the people recognised was that once upon a time she had stooped to folly, not even pausing to consider the circumstances. Here is a woman displaying a morality stronger, and rarer, and more poignantly beautiful, than they were likely to witness in a lifetime, a morality encompassing a sacrifice too tremendous for description, yet their minds were so befouled by their own conception of virtue that they came to the Palace to put her to death, which intention only their slushy sentimentality prevented them from fulfilling. If they had looked with horror upon those years as potential *destroyers of the godlike in man*, if they had sensed the tragedy of those years, in which supreme worth of character was threatened by desolation and waste, and sought in their souls for understanding and pity wherewith to help them cope with the thought of it, then they might have behaved as rational men and women, and not as a rabble. The hard fact is that when they pass judgement on these matters a large number of ordinary respectable people are always exactly like a rabble, and quite as cruel, and ravenous, and insane. They display the intellectuality of a leopard, and the imaginative qualities of a slug."

In this review Chesterton displays all his radical estrangement from the concept of liberal democracy, his elitism and his rejection of conventional bourgeois values of what is right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, for individuals to have done in the past. When reading this it is important to realise that Chesterton had himself struggled for several years to rid himself of alcoholism and despair, during which time he had lived "in sin" with a married woman. Small wonder then that in retrospect he should sympathise with the Queen's predicament,

and view those who make no attempt to understand those threatened by "desolation and waste" with the utmost hostility. In this context it is as well to recall his own words on the subject, as they appeared in his review of Journey's End:<sup>74</sup>

"The surviving Stanhopes came home to contemplate this strange mockery, and the sight did not help them in the task of transition which each and every one of them had to undertake or go under. Some did go under, lost in the hell-fires of an inevitable reaction; others struggled painfully with their souls through long years of suffering and at long last emerged with colours flying - owing nothing in gratitude to the world about them, which looked upon their strivings with an amused contempt, helping them on their way with taunts and jeers and ill-reports, caring nought...."

But, quite apart from his personal identification with the Queen's struggles, the piece is full of his anti-democratic sentiments and converse support for the aristocratic virtues of 'duty' and 'selfless sacrifice' in the national interest. The 'demos' is depicted as ruled by the thoughtless whim of the mob, against which the Queen employs a scorn paralleled only by Coriolanus's contempt for the Roman masses, with Chesterton's wholehearted endorsement of the sentiments.\* This endorsement

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\*Chesterton's mention of Coriolanus is interesting and deserves separate attention. He was one of Chesterton's favourite Shakespearean characters and his totally uncompromising stand for what he considered the truth and against the mere opinion of the Roman masses in the play of that name, caused Chesterton to develop a lifelong admiration for this character of fiction. Indeed, during the late 1940s he used the full name Caius Marcius Coriolanus as a pen-name when writing in various right-wing journals (along with that of Philip Falconbridge, Shakespeare's great English patriot). In a letter to a friend dated June 30th, 1972,\*\*Chesterton wrote:"Thank you...for the Coriolanus quotation. You may remember, Hilary, that my Roman alter ego did not take very kindly to that particular notion:'Plague upon't. I cannot bring my tongue to such a pace' - and then the famous election speech: 'You common cry of curs....'." The play and the character are certainly amongst Shakespeare's most political creations and display a considerable anti-populist feeling in the Bard. At one point Coriolanus exclaims:"What's the matter, you dissentious rogues,/That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion,/ Make yourselves scabs?" (I.i.168). Given all this it would seem perfectly congruous for Chesterton to view this figure as his alter ego\*\* (Copy of the letter sent to the author by the recipient, Mr. Hilary Cotter of Alberta, Canada.)

underlines what we already know of his estrangement from democracy.

Finally there is Chesterton's thorough approval of Kingly morality and leadership, based upon self-sacrifice to the common good and duty owed to the ruled in the form of good government in reciprocity for the power exercised over them. Such values elicit from him the claim that this is a transcendental morality on a par with the truths taught by the great poets. The ultimate goal is seen as creating the conditions necessary for the "God in man" to emerge - presumably in all men if they will only learn from the sacrifice of the leader and reciprocate with loyalty and devotion to the sovereignty of the nation state, with its traditional hierarchical stratification. In all this Chesterton seems to be moving towards accepting the need for a 'strong' leader, willing to make sacrifices for the national good.

Of all the works of modern drama from which Chesterton drew moral and political sanction those of George Bernard Shaw were the most influential and important. Throughout the inter-war period he carried on a love-hate relationship with Shaw and his works. He was not alone in this. His illustrious second cousin, G.K., was one of the many admiring critics of Shaw, alternatively puzzled and delighted by his eclecticism and seeming self-contradiction. Indeed, as Eric Bentley points out:<sup>75</sup> "He has defended socialism against socialists, liberty against liberals, science against scientists, religion against religionists. Naturally he is accused of being anti-socialist, anti-liberal, anti-scientific, and anti-religious."

For the purpose of this study it is, perhaps, best to begin the assessment of Shaw's influence on Chesterton by pointing to the similarity of their respective theologies. On many occasions in his literary writings of the period Chesterton refers to the human 'soul', the 'divine reality' of the poet's knowledge, which is the 'domain of the soul', while he avowed that the main task in dramatic interpretation was to seek out the 'spiritual essences' of the plays. Also, in his appreciation of Coward's work he draws the conclusion that ultimate human destiny rests upon realizing the 'God in man', or the 'godlike in man'. Finally we have his assertion, in print, that: "It is the lot of the poet, no less than of God, of whom he is the prophet, to be eternally crucified upon the earth."

For Chesterton was a highly spiritual agnostic. From late childhood he had been on the retreat from organized religion, and would never consider elevating Christian churches to a position of power within the state. Thus, on one occasion in 1932 he was moved to write that:<sup>76</sup>

"When cock-a-hoop ecclesiastical ignorance, impudently holding that God the Life-Giver is simply an ecclesiastical edition of its own smug littleness, seeks to legislate in the name of Heaven it does not often fail to reproduce on earth all the horrors of the pit, and it is this ignorance, bound up with Cannon Law which imposes a bestial cruelty upon so many private lives today."

This would place Chesterton broadly in agreement with Wilson Knight, inasmuch as both are condemning what they see as an effete and decadent ecclesiastical tradition, which has destroyed the original meaning of Christ's teachings. Chesterton is much less concerned than Knight with the actual text of the Bible, and lacking Knight's optimism for the existence of a "providential plan" was seeking a route for human regeneration through

human volition and willpower. For Chesterton, therefore, the 'soul' is less of a passive divine essence for good in man, than a 'life force', a potentiality for human action against evil, a means of volitional control of man's earthly environment.

How can Shaw's theology assist us in understanding this position? Well, to begin with, when Shaw was asked the ultimate religious question: "do you believe that there must be somebody behind the something?" He replied, "No. I believe there is something behind the somebody. All bodies are products of the Life Force (whatever that might be)."<sup>77</sup> Thus, for Shaw, the ultimate creative force was, like Plato's sun of truth, unknowable and mysterious for all time. But this does not mean that Shaw could not define what the concept of 'God' meant to him, and his explanation bears a certain resemblance to Chesterton's beliefs:<sup>78</sup>

"When you are asked, 'Where is God? Who is God?' stand up and say, 'I am God, and here is God,' not as yet completed, but still advancing towards completion, just inasmuch as I am working for the purpose of the universe, working for the good of society, and the whole world, instead of merely looking after my personal ends."

Now compare this with Chesterton's opinions as expressed in the debate over 'Power':<sup>79</sup>

"Whatever our destinies in the hereafter may be it is my firm belief that our present destiny is to do the best we can in the present world, and to make of it as clean-cut and honourable place as lies in our power. In the pursuance of this great work we can develop our characters, clarify our minds, help forward the good, resist the evil, seek out beauty, and at all times face life with disinterestedness and courage."\*

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\*In fact there is one major difference between Chesterton and Shaw in these pieces. Shaw, who was influenced in his doctrine of 'creative evolution' by Henri Bergson, believed to some extent in Wells' "progressive" history, whereas Chesterton preferred a more pessimistic view of man's historical travail. But both believed in the essential divinity of attempting

For Chesterton, the achievement of self-sacrifice, disinterested service in the cause of the nation and the Empire, and a devotion to duty at all costs, were ways of achieving the 'godlike' in man, and in talking of this he unashamedly uses the language of religious devotion. This too he shares with Shaw, and Eric Bentley has made some important observations about this aspect of Shaw's writings:<sup>80</sup>

"Shaw is not talking about God in the Christian sense but about human ethics. He is saying that like happiness, goodness is achieved as a by-product of working for an object higher than one's own goodness and happiness...Shaw's theology is no theology...It is chiefly a use of religious language. Not only does Shaw use the central term God quite unblushingly. His works are full of the words and phrases of the Bible, the church services, and the hymnal...he was trying to make the religious language he was brought up on go to work for the religion he grew up to...he is a sort of Protestant in his belief in protest and the individual conscience; yet a Catholic too in that he wants universal faith; a believer also in the sanctity of birth, fatherhood, motherhood, sonship, daughterhood, and the kinship of the great men of the spirit, in the divinity of all life, in the potential earthly ubiquity of heaven. Such a set of beliefs constitutes a Shavian theology. The churches and the orthodox theologians are irreligious."

If this is so, then Kenneth Chesterton was a Shavian theologian.

This, then, was the unacknowledged link between Chesterton and his contemporary hero, but what explicit influences can be traced? At first sight it might seem strange to call Shaw a 'hero' of Chesterton's. After all he vehemently rejected Shaw's didacticism and 'superman' theory and there were certain plays that he couldn't abide, like Pygmalion and Mrs. Warren's Profession. Indeed, he launched a no-holds-barred attack on Shaw

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to change the world for the better and for each this meant attempting to realise the 'God in man'. In short, they both felt that it was best to live as if the soul of man was in communion with a superhuman force which makes for righteousness, and neither felt that it was necessary to worship this divine essence through a form of church, or private, ritual.

when his play Too Good To Be True appeared in 1932 at the Malvern Festival.

He travelled to Malvern to review this new offering from the master for the Torquay Times, and in his autobiography he recalled an amusing incident which occurred at the gathering afterwards. Having viewed the play (and decided that it was Shaw's worst) he was introduced by his host, Roy Limbert, to Shaw. After several minutes of conversation - fortunately not about the play - Shaw was called away and Limbert guided his friend to the Festival Office where notables were gathered to discuss the play. One small man close to Chesterton asked him politely for his opinion of the play:<sup>81</sup>

"My reply was terse.

'It should be renamed 'Too Bad To Be Believable'.

The little man smiled and soon afterwards went out to join Shaw in the foyer.

Later Roy Limbert said to me:

'Personally I agree with your criticism but do you realise that the man to whom you just made it is supposed to be the model upon whom Shaw based the play's hero?'

'That nice little bloke?'

Roy nodded.

'Who is he?' I asked, bewildered.

'Lawrence of Arabia,' replied Roy."

Undeterred by his social mistake Chesterton returned to his newspaper and penned a withering attack on Shaw and his play. He began by insisting that the form and content of the play totally contradicted Shaw's didactic methodology, while at the same time failing completely to achieve a moral synthesis in the Shakespearean manner:<sup>82</sup>

"His didacticism is here shown as a ruin amidst all the other ruins in the desert of modernity."

Quite apart from these well rehearsed differences between Shaw



and his disciple, this particular play contained a message that Chesterton found particularly distressing. For it was centred on the mood of disillusion which had set in during the nineteen twenties amongst the war generation and in which Chesterton had shared. Shaw, however, believed that the struggle was still continuing and had affected the post-war generation too. To Chesterton, who felt that he had successfully struggled through his disillusion and despair, this was to needlessly blame the past for the failings of contemporary society:<sup>83</sup>

"He describes his play as illustrating the position of a war generation reacting to its experiences and of a post-war generation endeavouring to experience the reaction without having endured the action...The truth is that the members of the generation of the Great War by this time have either struggled with themselves and won their battle, or else they have 'gone under' and are no longer able to influence the destiny of their race. The post-war generation, apart from a handful of young fools who drew a good deal of undeserved publicity upon themselves, has never lost its grip upon life, and our greatest dramatist is surely not worrying his head about a few...exceptions....I may perhaps be permitted an even bolder statement, which is that today there is scarcely any emotional or intellectual chaos in our midst which can be directly attributed to the war."

In this it would seem that Shaw's point is valid. For while Chesterton had successfully overcome his despair at the betrayal of his wartime values, he had done so by replacing it with a vitalistic optimism that the original values were not only worth preserving, but would one day be realized in Britain. In the arts he had discovered a confirmation for his battlefield values and therefore, in this too, the war continued to exercise its influence over his life. Of course, Chesterton would have disputed that his ideas represented a form of 'intellectual chaos', with some degree of justification. Yet his ideas could hardly be called ordered either, representing as they did a process of eclectic borrowings and lessons drawn from personal

experience, forged in an atmosphere of disillusion and despair. In short, the war had not finished with Chesterton, nor had Chesterton finished with the war.

In spite of such criticisms of his great contemporary, Chesterton showed in his writings considerable support for many of Shaw's basic values and considered him to be the greatest dramatist of his age. This is evident from an article he wrote in 1929 as part of a series entitled: "Professions of the Great,"<sup>84</sup> in which he awarded mythical academic 'chairs' to those aesthetes of the time who he considered to be the greatest of the profession in Britain.\* To Shaw he awarded the chair of drama and, after a typically critical expression of admiration, he concluded in most generous terms:<sup>85</sup>

"The point is that [Shaw's heroes] reveal their creator as a most stimulating and constructive critic of life; and this revelation will be as apparent a thousand years hence as it is to the men living in the present time, for let there be no doubt about it, the lifework of George Bernard Shaw, master craftsman in the University of Drama, is destined to endure."

Let us now turn our attention to Chesterton's favourite Shavian creations - St. Joan and The Apple Cart - for further evidence of Shaw's influence upon him.

In one sense at least we might have predicted that Chesterton would approve of St. Joan, since it was the least didactic of Shaw's works. In it Shaw presents an irreconcilable conflict between St. Joan and the twin powers of the medieval state - the Church and the Aristocracy - and highlights the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the dispute. Thus, as Eric Bentley points out: "Shaw is not writing an 'individualist' defence of Joan, or a 'collectivist' defence of social order," and adds that

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\*He awarded Augustus John the chair of painting; Jacob Epstein the chair of sculpture; Sir James Barrie, Literature; and Rudyard Kipling, poetry.

Shaw feels no "Teutonic" glee in the sacrifice of an individual to "the goddess of history" and no "anarchistic joy in the defiance of Church and state."<sup>86</sup> Bentley concludes that in St. Joan: "the happy fact about his impartiality is that he seems to be, not on neither side....but on both sides...And Shaw's noble characterization carries the play beyond the political historical theme to an ultimate question: will this world ever be home for higher men?"

Ironically while Shaw was at his least didactic in this play, Chesterton chose to impose a didactic message on to the work, insisting that Shaw, rightly, presents us with an 'individualist' defence of Joan:<sup>87</sup>

"Mr. Bernard Shaw's version dealt with the attempts made by the existing order of things in the fifteenth century, represented by the authority of the Catholic Church on the one hand and feudalism or the authority of the Barons on the other, to crush and destroy the independence of the individual human mind."

Chesterton was also impressed by the epilogue - "that marvellous epilogue in which Shaw links his play to eternity" - which he sees as underlining the vision of St. Joan "of the flashing sword - the heroic figure of a thousand monuments." Unfortunately we have no more concrete evidence of his feelings than this, since the rest of the review is devoted to dealing with what Chesterton saw as the failure of this particular production to do justice to Shaw's great vision. Though he leaves us in no doubt as to the very high regard in which he holds the play:

"St. Joan has forced the modern world to re-assess its ideas not only about the period, but about the whole trend and meaning of history. It is not so much a drama as a revelation fraught with tremendous consequences for the world of thought."

There are, however, no such problems in obtaining a full picture of Chesterton's views on The Apple Cart. He was entirely explicit in his support for 'King Magnus' in his struggle

with the democratically elected Cabinet. When the play first appeared most critics assured their readers that Shaw had renounced his Fabianism for Monarchism with the writing of this play. This, in turn, provoked Shaw into writing a preface to the second edition of the playscript, denying the charge and asserting instead that: "The Apple Cart exposes the unreality of both democracy and royalty as our idealists conceive them." He also pointed out that the King wins in the end, not by exercising his royal authority, but by threatening to resign it and go to the country through the democratic poll. Once again it seems that Eric Bentley has best understood this Shavian intent: <sup>88</sup>

"The problem of the play is not King George verses Ramsay MacDonald but the question: Who knows better what is going on and who is best fitted to cope with the situation, Bernard Shaw the artist philosopher (as King Magnus), or Ramsay MacDonald the prime minister? Their common enemy is Breakages Limited, that is, capitalism, the sinister power which critics took no notice of because it is not personified on the stage. It lurks in the background....Shaw..in Magnus.. does not make himself...majestic. It is not clear that Magnus could really have won if he had gone to the polls, as he had threatened, against the politicians. It is not clear that the philosopher can replace the prime minister. No basic problems are cleared up at the end. We are left with the not very encouraging title of the play."

But faced with this vision of the artist-philosopher-ruler Chesterton was bound to respond with enthusiasm. Nor was he oblivious of the sinister presence of 'Breakages' hovering in the background. For him it is a play about the failings of liberal democracy to curb the power of vested interest and the need to replace it with the wise ruler as quickly as possible. Nor does he blame the problems of democracy upon the choice of second rate democrats to operate the system: <sup>89</sup>

Over/.....

"True they are but poor fish, as a great number of demagogues are poor fish, without intellect even when they possess a few brains, without imagination, entirely without culture, without guiding principles of any kind: creatures who act on the dictates of the moment, slaves to expediency, the prey to atmosphere, or to nothing more fertile than a primitive emotionalism, and who are unfitted to set themselves up in control of a community of jelly-fish, let alone a race of men who claim immortal souls. It is not the fault of these sorry windbags that the stream of the world's affairs should have broken its banks and come rushing helter-skelter to drown this ancient land of ours in the depths of the insuperable sea. It is not even their fault that, in the Shavian conception of the future, the more democracy permeates politics the more hurriedly the seat of power transfers itself elsewhere, so that commercialism swallows up nine tenths of the earth, and is about to swallow up the remaining tenth part when the curtain falls. Neither is it the fault of each or any of the 'systems' against which Mr. Shaw has tilted all his life. Instead it is the cumulative cupidity of mankind, blind, insensate, like the elemental ghosts who crouch behind tors."

Nor yet did he ignore the fundamental ambiguity of the King's position in seeking to solve the problems of modern civilization:

"Against the deplorable Cabinet Ministers Mr. Shaw's hero stands four square to the wind and adroitly wins a blazing triumph. Against the final onrush of mankind's organized and conscienceless greed, promised at the play's end, he cannot very well hope to stand, although a condescending, fatuous and purblind advance notice of The Apple Cart assured us that he probably would."

Thus, Chesterton's basic sympathy with Shaw's position and his own growing radicalism allowed him to recognize the insecurity and pessimism contained within the play. He saw clearly that beneath the ironic humour of the play: "Shaw has made a personal confession, and allowed us a glimpse of a sense of personal tragedy." He also came closer than other critics to understanding where the true optimism in the play lay, sharing with Shaw, as he did, the belief that striving for virtue and the goodness of humanity is a sign of health in society. Indeed, Shaw would surely have agreed with Chesterton's conclusion that "one is left hugging the compensatory thought that so long as character is at grips with the world Hope must

ever beckon from the portals of the future and life never be wholly unpleasant to the taste." For, as one critic has observed, while Magnus is not presented as 'majestic', he is presented: "with more consistent respect, as a quiet, wise, naturalistic hero, than any other central figure in the Shavian canon."<sup>90</sup>

Before summing up the problems raised in attempting to understand this period in Chesterton's life, it is interesting to take a look at one final piece written by him. This time it is a short story which appeared in the Torquay press in 1929, and was entitled "Mocking Bird".<sup>91</sup> The story is important because it brings into focus Chesterton's passionate belief in the inevitable conflict between the truth of an artistic temperament in communion with natural forces, and the falsity of the 'materialistic' personality absorbed by the bright-lights of urban sophistication.

The story contains only two important characters - Hewett, an artist working in his studio in the Cotswolds, and his new wife Lenore. We are introduced to the artist at work in his studio awaiting his wife's return from London where it seems that she has retreated from the harsh reality of the past rural winter. Apparently she had felt an "alien in a strange land" when the winter arrived and Chesterton is careful to describe her London sojourn as "hibernation". She is also presented as a woman who can "command unusual proceedings", such as this flight from her new husband.

As he awaits his wife's return Hewett works on a portrait of Lenore which had begun the previous summer:

"The beauty of which it told, indeed, might itself have been the conception of some surpassingly great painter...a painter who had seen to it that the form was perfect because he was an artist, but who had also invested it with a soul because he was a poet..."

Lenore returns and once again all seems wonderful. Then one day they stand together before the finished portrait, transfixed by the excellence of the work and the beauty of Lenore. Yet Hewett is still uncertain of his deepest feelings about the work: "What worries me is that the finished work diverges ever so slightly from my original conception." The moment passes unheeded.

Lenore now reveals that she cannot even stay for the entire spring and desires to return to London immediately. Her remarks are revealing:

"I suppose I am very much of a hot house plant and will never be able to thrive for long, except in the surroundings to which I have become accustomed. The stark simplicity of the countryside appalls me."

Hewett, a man whose "nature was as grand and sweeping as his genius", lovingly consents to her return. (By now it is clear to the reader that Chesterton is sacrificing the plot entirely to the overall message of the piece, and that he is not a particularly good story teller.) Lenore, realizing the enormity of her request, is ashamed and Hewett is startled by the look on her face: "it was that illusive, hitherto inexplicable look which lurked upon the face he had painted upon the canvas." Once again the moment passes without further comment.

Having seen his wife safely on to the train for London Hewett walks back to his studio through the beautiful Cotswold spring and reflects that: "After all...when mankind has spent century upon century building up great cities is it any wonder that it should have developed into the bargain a psychology antagonistic to any other environment?"

Suddenly a cuckoo flies from a nearby hedge and emits a harsh cry close to his ear. Instantly he is seized with the truth of an intuitive certainty. He rushes to the local tavern and,

in spite of the fact that he is tee-total, orders a strong drink of spirits. After two 'doubles' he has managed to recover sufficient of his equilibrium to survey his surroundings. He finds himself surrounded by the local country folk:

"These fellows, he told himself were at one with the honest simplicity of the soil; they lived out their lives in the light, and were as sane and wholesome as the crops they grew. The trouble with him was that he lived too much in the realm of introspection; he needed to get out of himself and mix with people like these honest farming folks, so that he might learn from them the secret of how the issue of one's life might be kept free from entanglements."

He visits the pub nightly and for a few evenings brandy serves to keep his "bestial suspicions" at bay. One evening, however, when returning from the hostelry to his studio he is no longer able to "outrun the slimy, nauseating fears that kept pace with him, clinging to the wind and whistling, hostile." Suddenly it seemed as if the "entire race of cuckoos" had come to haunt him, making the air "hideous with their screeching." Almost deranged he staggers into the studio where a scene of the utmost horror greets him:

"Vile fantastic shapes in the most fantastic posturings began to take on a semblance of order, clustering like a garland around a central shape of a woman hideously fair of face, with vipers for hair and a smile upon her lips that was not good to look at - a smile that mocked and leered and profaned."

We learn no more of the events until the next morning when Lenore and her lover arrive at the cottage, prepared to face Hewett with the truth of their affair and to ask for a divorce. Finding no answer to their calls they peer in through the window of the studio:

"and saw Hewett dead upon the floor an antique knife grasped firmly in his hand. A foot or two away was a fallen easel, and with it a painting of a beautiful woman whom the antique knife had stabbed through the heart. From high up the hill came the crystal-clear notes of the mocking bird.

Cuckoo! Cuckoo!

But it is unlikely that the couple heard the call as they turned away from the window and looked at each other questioningly in the eyes."



Whatever we might think about Chesterton's abilities as a short story writer, we must agree that it expresses clearly his preoccupation with the artistic sensibility. It is Hewett's artistic intuition which provides him with the truth, through his portrait of Lenore, long before his reason could provide understanding. This is a perfect illustration of Chesterton's belief that the message of Art is truth. Hewett's inability to cope with the first glimmerings of the truth is related to his failure to live as a true country person like those honest fellows in the local inn; and it is a cuckoo, another being in touch with natural forces of truth, that finally brings him to realize the truth he cannot withstand. Lenore is the cosmopolitan and *materialist* completely unable to hear the truth trumpeted by the mocking bird. Finally, throughout the piece one can sense Chesterton's horror at the inability of many to see the truth, and the failure of many of those who do see it to cope with the reality of its revelations. Indeed, the whole story is bathed in the horror of Chesterton's 'naked mind'.

It is difficult to summarise the lessons to be learnt from this chapter, except to point to the similarities between Chesterton and the German critics studied by Stern, in the sense that he believed that art was the signpost to the ultimate truth and that this truth could therefore be used to analyse contemporary political problems. Julius Langbehn chose Rembrandt as his cultural exemplar, a volitional being, a spiritual being, in touch with the deepest traditions of his people and yet able to transcend as well as to express their needs. Significantly Stern remarks that: "Except for Shakespeare, who appears as a

lesser hero...he could not have selected an artist more easily converted into his kind of ideal,"<sup>92</sup> and Shakespeare was, of course, exactly the person selected by Chesterton to fulfil this role. For him Shakespeare was the consummate artist, and supreme expression of Englishness able, through his effortless command of self-expression, instinct and creativity, to translate knowledge into truth and virtue: the artist-hero personified. Like Wilson Knight, who shared his tendency to fuse metaphysics with political philosophy, Chesterton's passionate cultural nationalism reinforced his equally vehement political patriotism. Shakespeare, Shelley, Swinburne, Shaw - all were supreme artists who could only have been produced by the supreme cultural nation. Judging England's claim to civilization with reference to its artistic achievements Chesterton had concluded that it was the highest flowering of civilization ever achieved. Just as the German critics had decided, on the same grounds, that Germany was first amongst the nations.

During his period in Stratford and Torquay, between 1924 and 1933, Chesterton developed a tendency to view the external happenings of the world through the medium of his artistic values. Indeed, to a considerable degree he ceased to separate out his political and social from his artistic experiences. Here is an individual constantly reviewing literary and dramatic works and reading and viewing other works in his leisure time, while at the same time engaged in local political and social affairs. The very narrowness of the world in which he was living allowed him to turn inwards and concentrate on developing a metaphysical sanction for his social and political radicalism.

Thus, in the works of Shakespeare and Shaw Chesterton discovered what he believed to be the irrefutable 'truth' that "Democracy" could never work, with which he sanctioned his existing prejudice against the system and used to underline his experiences of political corruption in Torquay. In similar fashion he discovered in great works of drama and poetry the absolute truth that values such as duty, self-sacrifice and intellectual disinterestedness were much more important than those of liberal individualism, with its emphasis on competitive self-interest and acceptance of materialistic values. To Chesterton the fact that metaphysical 'irrationalism' could provide such timeless truths, was clear evidence that liberal rationalism and scientific positivism were useless in seeking a blueprint for a better society. Indeed, he viewed such values as positively harmful, since they made it seem possible that society could change for the better if only it were armed with a proper plan for the future, and thereby ignored totally the need to change the values of the individuals who make up the society as a proper foundation for change.

In reading his works during this period one is reminded of the words of Oscar Wilde who had predicted:<sup>93</sup>

"I am certain that, as civilization progresses and we become more highly organized, the elect spirits of each age, the critical cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched. For life is terribly deficient in form..."\*

Chesterton, of course, was still passionately interested in

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\*The author's italics.

'actual life', but unconsciously he had moved towards a position during this period of his life in which many of his impressions of life did come from the realm of artistic creation, rather than from direct, or indirect, observation.

The core of Chesterton's cultural despair, however, came from the clash of his poetic vision of the 'good society' and the harsh reality of inter-war Britain. Faced with the development of an ever more 'mass' society, with an education system dedicated, in the main, to producing docile and materialistic workers, and a media and publishing system devoted on the whole to trivializing knowledge and information, he came increasingly to believe that life did, indeed, suffer from a terrible deficiency of 'form'. All this he saw as a threat to traditional culture and consequently also to the moral fabric of society. His first reaction to this was to embark on what he hoped would become a national cultural crusade on behalf of Shakespeare in the pages of The Shakespeare Review, where he looked forward to: "the redemption of the semi-literate masses from their present quagmires of sickly sentimentality - a redemption that will no doubt be much to the good of their souls."<sup>94</sup>

But such idealism proved, inevitably, to be utopian in its optimism and, in the last resort, having found no change in British society commensurate with his values, Kenneth Chesterton threw his cultural despair, along with his social, political and racial alienation, into the Fascist political ferment.

We can observe this crucial transition from poetic propaganda to political action in two fascinating extracts from notices of plays written by Chesterton in the period which led up to his decision to join Mosley. Both are reviews of Shaw's play Too

True To Be Good. In the first, published almost a year before he became a Fascist, he ends with a rhetorical question. How, he asks, is society to obtain the "physical leadership", as distinct from "intellectual leadership", that it so badly needs? The problem, as he sees it, is that such leadership cannot make itself known "amidst the clamour of the social conspiracy." His answer to this problem is most interesting:<sup>95</sup>

"As the result of the efforts of men like Mr. Shaw and Mr. Wells the younger members of the community know what is wrong, and are able to visualise a saner order of things. How is this order to be brought into being? Mr. Shaw can only answer this by turning man of action."

In the second article, written only a few months before he joined Mosley, he amplified the point:<sup>96</sup>

"World problems of today are not to be denied. They are towering and immense, demanding of all sane men a superhuman patience and a superhuman energy of thought. They are things which have to be tackled. Mr. Shaw has talked admirably and lucidly about their precursors in the past. Now that he merely talks in endless circles around their simularcra it is perhaps time that they were handed over to men of action who shall lead us forward to their conquest. The day of the mighty talkers is drawing to a close, for a time at least."

This, then, was his final epitaph for his cultural idealism. Yet surely there is a deep irony here. For even as he adopts an openly political solution he is acknowledging the importance of Shaw - the dramatist - as the representative of the "mighty talkers" from whom the philosophy of the men of action is to be drawn.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CREED OF A FASCIST REVOLUTIONARY

"No matter how unacceptable an argument may be, it will nevertheless be worthy of patient examination."

Max Nordau.

"survival today demands a philosophy, and that philosophy, refusing to treat peace and war as antithetical states of existence, can only find its true expression through a creed of the modern age, known variously as National Socialism, Fascism, authoritarianism, or what you will."

A.K. Chesterton: British Union Quarterly, July-September, 1937.

The decision taken by Chesterton, late in 1933, to throw in his lot with Mosley and British Fascism, was almost certainly the single most important decision of his life. To begin with it removed this already controversial figure from the almost total obscurity of provincial journalism and placed him in

the national political arena. Equally important it ensured that he would spend the rest of his life as an activist and propagandist of the extreme-Right in Britain. For from this initial Fascist commitment Chesterton drew the basis of an ideology which was destined to monopolize his thinking until his death almost forty years later. From now on he was an 'insider',<sup>1</sup> a man who considered himself party to privileged access to the 'truth' about the workings of the world of men, and he retained his basic faith in this in spite of the many disappointments he suffered at the hands of his allies in the cause. After Fascism there could be no question of turning back for him - only of going forward ever deeper into the political ghetto which is the extreme-Right in Britain.

Before embarking on the analysis of this vitally important period in Chesterton's life, it is necessary to say a few words about the structure of this present chapter. Because of the complexity of dealing with Chesterton's Fascist ideas I have split the work into four, unequal, parts. The first part contains a fairly brief summary of the events surrounding Chesterton's involvement with the B.U.F.. It would, of course, be most interesting to attempt to provide a detailed picture of the working relationships that existed between Chesterton and his fellow leaders. Unfortunately, however, the Chesterton papers

help us very little in this respect. The reason for this is that he was little interested in his past association with Mosley and therefore made little attempt to preserve any papers on the period. Nor would he comment in any detail on this portion of his life. Thus, even his autobiography manages to totally ignore the period, except for comments in passing which have no direct bearing on his Fascist experiences. Not only was he attempting to live down the accusation that he had both espoused genocidal anti-Semitism, and had supported Nazi brutality,\* but also he had no wish to recall a period during which he had virtually canonized Mosley, only to discover by 1938 that his leader could no longer command even his complete respect, let alone his undying loyalty.

Nor can other archives help us much. It is an unfortunate fact that students of British Fascism have found very little evidence about the internal history of the B.U.F.. The Home Office may well have seized much vital material during their raid on the B.U.F. Headquarters, and if so it will be (because of the '100 Year Rule') scholars working in 2040 who will be able to reveal the real facts. Many documents may have been lost, or even wilfully destroyed - perhaps they remain in private hands to this day? But one thing is certain, without such material the internal workings of the Mosley movement will remain a matter for intelligent conjecture, rather than proven fact.

The opening narrative section is followed by two further parts which together form the central analysis of Chesterton's

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\*"As I was associated with O.M. forty years ago, I never hope to escape the Fascist smear." Letter from Chesterton to John Mitchell, dated June 15th, 1973. CC/Uncatalogued.



Fascist beliefs. The first deals with the whole question of his anti-Semitism and his attitude towards Nazism and genocide. It is necessary to deal with this first because, until now, this has been widely regarded as representing the core of Chesterton's commitment to Fascism. As such it is important to establish from the outset just what kind of Fascist anti-Semitism Chesterton espoused. For if he was motivated by biological and materialist racism, then there is little need to look any further to discover the animating core of his Fascism. For, like all determinisms, the pseudo-scientific tenets of biological racial prejudice, when allied to a conspiracy theory, must provide the ultimate rationale of any individual holding such beliefs. Thus, while Nazism undoubtedly represented the apotheosis of many reactionary ideals in German society - nationalism, imperialism, elitism, militarism and xenophobia - these all existed in subordination to Hitler's obsession with the preservation of "Aryan man", and the consequent destruction of the Jewish "bacillus". If Chesterton held similar views the search for causation would, therefore, largely be over. It is the conclusion of this section that he did not hold to such views and this opens the way for the next section which deals with the rest of his Fascist ideals, in an attempt to demonstrate that there was more to his Fascism than a simple wish to attack the Jews.

The fourth, and final, section contains a fairly lengthy conclusion, which not only attempts to answer the question: what kind of Fascist was Chesterton? - but also seeks to contrast his motivations and ideals with those of Mosley and William Joyce, in order to demonstrate the personal and doctrinal differences between these men, nominally of the same creed.

## Part 1.

From Commitment to Disillusionment.

When Doris Terry married Kenneth Chesterton at Kingston-upon-Thames, on August 5th, 1933, she had little or no idea of her new husband's growing commitment to the ideals of Fascism. For she had left Torquay in 1931 to take up a position as a history and English teacher at a Kingston school. Nor had she kept in close contact with him during the interval. After all he was living with "Mrs A.K. Chesterton" in Torquay and there was little reason for her to suspect that her love for him would ever result in marriage at such a distance and under such circumstances. However, early in 1933 Chesterton resigned as Editor of the Torquay Times Group, over some unspecified disagreement with his employers and arrived in London alone to seek work as a freelance. He contacted Doris, whom he had met only twice in the intervening two years and after a classic 'whirlwind romance' they were married.<sup>2</sup>

Doris, herself a Fabian Socialist,\* knew only that he had called himself a 'Socialist' when in Torquay and had approved of her avowed intention of voting for Labour in the 1929 General Election. She had since become a member of the

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\*Basically she was a libertarian socialist of pacifist inclinations. She read the New Statesman and was a member of the Left Book Club during the 30s and towards the end of the decade she joined the Peace Pledge Union. This led to the interesting situation in which she was on the streets selling Peace News, at the very time when her husband was editing Action and The Blackshirt. "Having listened through nearly half my life to [Doris's] enunciation of half-baked concepts taken from the New Statesman." Letter from Chesterton to Rosine de Bounevielle, dated 18th February, 1965. CC/Chesterton-Bounevielle correspondence - un-numbered Box File.

recently formed Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals, a vaguely left-wing grouping of intellectuals and mystics, and prior to her marriage had arranged to attend a F.P.S.I. conference in France. The conference was organized by Dr. C.E.M. Joad, the leader of the Federation, and Doris decided to try and arrange for her husband to attend at short notice. She succeeded and in so doing ensured that their political differences would become very apparent. The conference, which was held at Bures in the Seine et Loire district of France, was included on their honeymoon itinerary, following a walking holiday on the South Downs. The organizers were most kind and allocated them the best room in the Chateau in accordance with their newly married status. Socially there was little problem as Chesterton was always a charming man, and his hosts were highly liberal in their views. But the lectures and discussion groups did reveal very real differences of opinion, as Doris Chesterton recalled:<sup>3 a</sup>

"It was at this conference that K. and I realized how far apart we had grown (in political thought only!) during the two years we had been parted...Never one to keep silence at a conference he joined in quite a bit and was certainly odd man out..."

A few years later Chesterton himself recalled one of these discussions in which Joad had been putting forward his own brand of socialism and had then invited questions from the floor. Chesterton's question brought into high relief his radicalism:<sup>3 b</sup>

"If you were in a position to implement your policy except for the opposition of the Press Lords intent upon the sabotage of your plans, what would you do - allow socialism to be wrecked or abolish the political liberty of the Press Lords?"

According to Chesterton Joad, nonplussed by the question, replied: "I'm sure I don't know. I should like to have your own opinion." Such exhibitions of extremism did not, however, alert Doris to the possibility that he might soon become a Fascist

activist. Others were not so blind:<sup>4</sup>

"There was an impromptu concert at the end, and about 12 souls had made up verses to a song with the chorus 'with an ee-i, ee-i, ee-i, ee-i, O'...each verse taking off someone in the conference - mostly people like Joad and the lecturers.

But somebody picked on Kenneth and sang:-

'A.K. Chesterton it seems  
Sometimes has black-shirted dreams.'

Alas! He was in a black-shirt within six months!"

So began a most remarkable marriage which was to endure with mutual love, (in spite of their political differences) for forty years. At the conference in 1933 Chesterton's interjections were viewed with tolerance and without ill-will by Doris's friends and fellow progressives of the Left. But things soon changed in this respect:<sup>5</sup>

"later on when Fascism v. the Left became like the initial stages of a civil war there were fireworks between his friends and mine. We found it wiser to have parties of either his friends or mine. But throughout the years in spite of the differences some of my best friends remained his friends and certainly some of his to this day remain mine."

One particular piece of writing by Doris exactly captures both her feelings towards Chesterton when they first met and the sense of urgency which he must have exuded at that time. It appears in a novel written by her in 1939 and takes the form of a description of him as she remembered him back in 1928.<sup>6</sup> He appears under another name as the Editor of the local newspaper in the mythical town of "Farrquay" and is also Chairman of the newly formed amateur dramatic society. The heroine, Doris under a different name, has fallen in love with him and is writing a description of him to her sister; a description which Doris remembers as "exactly right as I remember it at the time"<sup>7</sup>

over/.....

"If I had Judy's gift I'd paint him for you Liza, just as he looked then, with the inky blackness for a background, and fire-light illuminating his face. There seemed a sort of affinity between him and the flames. Like a devil or a salamander he seemed to be at home with them. But unless that is giving you the wrong picture, I must say at once that there is kindness in his face. In a strong, rugged, cadaverous way, he is handsome. There's something at the same time noble and rebellious about him, like Satan in 'Paradise Lost'. A light seems to be smouldering in his eyes as if he were aware of a great mission to perform. He's like some forceful creature aware of great strength, but not knowing where to direct it. 'Like a prophet', I thought as I looked at him, 'like a great prophet - but a prophet in search of a creed.' "

In 1933 he found both a creed and another prophet whom he felt he could follow. The creed was Fascism and the man was Mosley.

Just how much Chesterton knew of Mosley's movement, or about the general phenomenon of European Fascism, prior to his initial contact with the B.U.F., is a matter for conjecture. Certainly he was never moved to write of Fascism in general, or of any particular Fascist, before he joined Mosley. We know from his wife that he was moved to defend the Italian Fascists and the Nazis in a conversation with Sir Archie Flower which took place in 1933.\* But apart from that there is no direct evidence that he had read Mosley's New Party or early B.U.F. policy statements. In this context it is interesting to note that during this period Chesterton was an avid reader of the Observer newspaper. Even more significant is the fact that his favourite political commentator on the paper was

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\*It seems that Flower invited Chesterton to Stratford to offer him the position of editor of a new publicity journal to be launched to publicise the events at the Memorial Theatre world-wide. Chesterton refused and during the conversation that ensued made a brief defence of Hitler's record in Germany. Cf. Interview with Doris L. Chesterton, February 8th, 1980, p2.

J.L. Garvin. For Garvin was a professional Mosley watcher and probably Mosley's most staunch supporter in the national press at that time. An early sceptic he soon warmed to Mosley's fearless brand of politics and in 1930 described one of Mosley's speeches to the Commons as "Brilliant and powerful, without rhetoric..."<sup>8</sup> Later, after reading the Mosley "Memorandum", Garvin praised him for his "brilliant fearlessness".<sup>9</sup> In fact the Observer under Garvin's editorship was, apart from the Manchester Guardian the only major newspaper to recognize the need for adventurers like Mosley in the political arena of the twenties and thirties, the era of 'safety-first', 'no experiments' and retrenchment. In November 1930 Garvin wrote in exasperation that:<sup>10</sup>

"No one remembers a time when discontents were so rife in all parties together and when movements were so kaleidoscopic. The whole country feels that fundamental changes are required... Amongst the younger generation in all parties the strongest sentiment is in favour of 'clearing out the Old Gangs'."

Chesterton's passion for reading Garvin is understandable given his approach and such reading would surely have equipped him with a favourable view of Mosley's economic and social proposals. It would also highlight Mosley's refusal to compromise for the sake of mere party unity, or electoral success. Most probably then, his knowledge and approval of Mosley was that of an informed, sympathetic, but detached observer.

This would seem to be borne out by the fact that Chesterton does not seem to have approached the Mosley movement with the avowed intention of joining it. Indeed, the circumstances surrounding his initial contact with the organization owed something to chance. During 1933 he had been building up a freelance business as a journalist in London and after their

marriage in August he and Doris moved into a flat in Chelsea. Ironically it was opposite the Whiteland Teachers Training College where Doris had trained to become a teacher. But the irony was double for, shortly after their arrival, Mosley acquired the lease on the now disused buildings, and they became the headquarters of the B.U.F. - the infamous Black House.

Living in such close proximity the temptation for Chesterton proved irresistible and one day he wandered across to the grey buildings draped with the B.U.F. symbol, his curiosity having got the better of him. To Doris's immense relief he returned in dismissive mood saying: "it is one of the most naive things I've ever seen, they're so young!"<sup>11</sup> Doris's relief soon turned to dismay as his support for the ideals of the movement ensured that his distrust did not prevent him from further visits to the Black House. There he met the man who, according to Doris, was most responsible for converting Chesterton into an activist for the movement - Rex Tremlett. At that time Tremlett was Mosley's deputy editor of publications and editor of Fascist Week and Blackshirt. As the man to 'sell' the idea to Chesterton he was almost perfect. He shared Chesterton's South African and Berkhamstead background. At the age of sixteen he had begun to seek for gold in Nyasaland and had tramped Central Africa after the elusive precious metal until 1928. He had then become a journalist and had edited several trade papers in Johannesburg. Since the age of sixteen he claimed to have had twenty-six jobs and only once been sacked. He was also a man who considered "fools more dangerous than criminals" and was "always in a hurry."<sup>12</sup> Finally he had a keen sense of humour, something lacking in many of his colleagues in the movement. That such a

man would be able to command Chesterton's attention, especially when he shared many of his political values, was only natural and the meetings with Tremlett made his decision to join, late in November 1933, a mere formality.

But can we say more about Chesterton's decision to join the B.U.F.? Can we include the impact of Mosley as the leader and man of inspired prophecy upon Chesterton? Doris Chesterton certainly thinks that this was a factor influencing his decision. She remembers his "hero worship"<sup>13</sup> of Mosley and her own dismay that he had "fallen for Mosley"<sup>14</sup> Also, in her opinion, the fact that he was "influenced by Carlyle", "helps to account for his acceptance of the 'superman' theory in the early days with Mosley".<sup>15\*</sup>

As to Chesterton's initial perception of Mosley it is easy to imagine his fellow feeling for the man, a brother officer, a fellow 'warrior' of World War One, another kindred spirit who had attained his manhood, not in the easy environment of a university, but rather on the field of battle. Added to this was his admiration for those in history who, like Mosley, placed their ideals above their personal interests and sacrificed their careers for what they saw as the ultimate betterment of mankind.

Also important was the way in which Mosley was compared by his followers to a man of the Tudor aristocracy seeking to bring

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\*This is interesting as Chesterton, while offering a distinctly Carlylean view of the 'truth' of the great artist's work, never mentions Carlyle by name in his pre-Fascist writings. It is also interesting to recall that Chesterton had rejected Shaw's version of the "superman" in his writings - see above p189.



back the true paternalist economics of the Elizabethan age, which had since become submerged beneath centuries of growing 'bourgeois' capitalist power. W.E.D. Allen, a leading Party philosopher in the early days of the movement, stressed this aspect very strongly in his book: B.U.F. Oswald Mosley and British Fascism:<sup>16</sup>

"Had the Tudor policy of the Nation-State and of a controlled capitalism succeeded, it is likely that we might have had today a classless nation, distinguished only in social grades by the existence of numerous functional categories, who would not have been alienated from each other by vast differences of economic status. As it was, the bourgeois class-dictatorship, and not the functional state, emerged from the chaos of the Parliamentary Wars, which saw the overthrow of the Tudor Nation-State conception...In those brilliant days of English history, the control and regulation of capital was a definite aim of State policy. The economic freedom of the individual - freedom, that is, from starvation - was assured by a system of control of the conditions of labour, and assistance for the destitute, which was without parallel in the Europe of those days. Had the Elizabethan system been maintained, the coming of the Industrial Revolution and the Age of Mechanics might have been a slower process, but it must undoubtedly have been steadier and more ordered...How different was the [Tudor] aristocrat - the great leader and the artist of the medieval world, who - as was natural - achieved his finest manifestations during the Renaissance, when his own background of the feudal world was, in fact, already within the shadows. The Plantagenet princes...were dim Shakespearean memories when the last of the English aristocrats strode to their pre-destined scaffolds...The Parliamentary Wars had been fought to overthrow the nascent authoritarian state of the Tudors and the Cecils, which was at once curbing the power of the new bourgeois class, and crippling their methods of making themselves rich."

One can well imagine Chesterton's response to such ideas, imbued as he was with a profound admiration for Shakespearean drama and Elizabethan England. The tendency to view Mosley as a man of the spirit of the Tudor aristocracy must have seemed attractive to Chesterton under these circumstances.

But whatever the specific nature of Chesterton's initial view of the B.U.F. it is certain that his commitment to the movement and its creed was total from the very beginning.

British Fascism had gained a new and selfless activist. He appeared before his new colleagues as: "a likeable and opinionated man of thirty four; tall, lean, a pair of piercing eyes lighting his narrow face. His high enthusiasms...tempered by a charming sense of humour."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Chesterton's receptiveness to both the social and intellectual ethos of the movement was absolute. His wife remembered that:<sup>18</sup>

"He was so convinced that the message of British Fascism was correct that he came away from his first speeches given as a B.U.F. propagandist completely unable to understand why those who had listened to his brave words had not immediately rallied to the cause...He thought that to listen to the fascist message was sufficient to open almost anyone's eyes to the tricks of the 'Old Gang'...."

Initially, and much to Doris's dismay, he was sent by Mosley to organize the Midlands section of the Party in Birmingham; presumably because of his links with Stratford and the South Midlands. Here he quickly established a reputation for efficient organization and hard work, driving his Blackshirt subordinates very hard in the process. At the same time he contributed regular articles to the national Fascist press. Only one incident from this period is worth recording. It occurred in Evesham where Chesterton had organized a meeting to be addressed by William Joyce from the National H.Q. Joyce arrived and proceeded to lecture the assembled company for two solid hours on the subject of "India". Doris Chesterton was there and afterwards:<sup>19</sup>

"Kenneth brought him over and asked if we could put him up over night...I phoned our landlady and received an affirmative reply and upon returning to the hall found it deserted...But in the distance I could hear a cry from many voices - 'Two, Four, Six, Eight, who do we appreciate M-O-S-L-E-Y!' - on running out into the street I was greeted with the sight of William Joyce leading Kenneth and his Blackshirts on a late night march around the town. It seems that Joyce had discovered that there was an Italian quarter in the town and had led the march through the district in a show of solidarity with Italy."

Mosley soon recognized that Chesterton's greatest talents lay in his abilities as a propagandist and he was duly brought back to the National H.Q. in the summer of 1934 and made a full member of the Policy Directorate. Here, in the Black House, he was plunged into the heady atmosphere that characterised the early years of the B.U.F. and he was later to recall this time spent in the gaunt buildings in Kings Road, Chelsea, with great affection:<sup>20</sup>

"It was the centre of its [Fascism's] gay bustling and in a sense turbulent life - the intellectual and social as well as organizational centre. Its offices were occupied by men working fourteen and fifteen hours a day; its lecture halls... filled with students eager to learn everything about this new and exciting crusade; its club rooms rang with laughter and song of men who felt that the advent of Fascism had made life again worth living."

Fired with enthusiasm Chesterton worked ever harder to realize the collective dream of Fascist regeneration and his Fascist subordinates were left in no doubt as to his total sincerity and devotion to the cause. To be only nominally on his side was never sufficient proof of true Fascist commitment in his view; a classic illustration of this occurred when he returned to the Midlands in 1935 to check on the efficiency of the local branches. Arriving in Stoke Chesterton discovered a Fascist drinking and social club with separate bars marked 'Officers' and 'Blackshirts'.\* Along the counters ran tankards, each bearing its owners name. As Colin Cross suggests: "The apparition of a tense, eager Chesterton must have been a great shock." He closed the club, dismissed the leadership and expelled 300 members in one go - the largest purge in the movement's history.<sup>21</sup>

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\*In Colin Cross's account of this he states that the drinking club was in Coventry. But in a letter to me he has recalled that Chesterton queried this point after publication, insisting that it was, in fact, in Stoke. Cf. Colin Cross: The Fascists in Britain, Barrie and Rockliff, London, 1961, p138.

Exasperated by her husband's selfless devotion to duty, Doris Chesterton wrote a revealing sketch entitled "Fascist Widows". To her surprise and embarrassment Rex Tremlett obtained a copy and published a less controversial version in The Fascist Week.<sup>\*</sup> It is in the form of a dialogue between two women 'widowed' by their husbands' commitment to the Fascist cause. The first Fascist widow (F.F.W.) is recently 'bereaved', while the second fascist widow (S.F.W.) 'lost' her husband several months earlier:<sup>22</sup>

F.F.W. My dear, I had to call. I thought you'd understand, and perhaps help. The truth is - my husband's caught Fascism.

S.F.W. Darling! Of course I understand, and I'm very sympathetic. My own husband is six months gone with it.

F.F.W. Mine's got Fascism on the brain!

S.F.W. Ah! The worst place to have it. Most don't get affected beyond the emotions. That's bad enough, of course, but when it touches the brain!!! What are his symptoms?

F.F.W. Well in the first place he never sleeps. He talks all night.

S.F.W. Of Fascism, Fascists, and Fascist Policy? I know!!!

F.F.W. If he can't bring a Communist home to quarrel with, he brings in five or six Fascist friends to agree with. And if they don't stay up all night and talk to him, he talks to me, or has a monologue.

S.F.W. He's got it all right!

F.F.W. And he never stops to eat a regular meal - says Fascist business leaves him no time.

S.F.W. You must get used to that. My husband has lived on cigarettes and coffee for six months.....

[The second Fascist widow's husband returns.]

S.F.W. John dear, come in! We were just having a little talk about Fascism...What my precious? The Communists have slit your throat, have they? Never mind, dear, it will be my evening's recreation to sew it up. Perhaps you will hold the bowl for us Ada, and John will explain the economics of plenty...."

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<sup>\*</sup>"it caused quite a stir in the movement as it was thought by many to be too frivolous...at a time when 'Fascist women' were being encouraged to pursue more serious matters." Interview with Doris Chesterton, May 9th, 1978, p8.

Allowing for the obvious exaggerations, the picture one obtains from this small piece fits in well with Chesterton's memories of the early B.U.F.. In those heady days there was also a genuine feeling among the elite and senior rank and file at the H.Q., that British Fascism was a truly revolutionary phenomenon. Led by a man who had publicly renounced the chance of becoming Prime Minister, they saw themselves not as a bunch of crazed authoritarians and racists, but rather as a dedicated group of true patriots, free from political corruption and linked to an internationally accepted political creed. They considered that they were part of a legitimate crusade against all the trends of 'decadence' which afflicted their age - Communism, liberalism, finance capitalism and bourgeois democracy. In this heady atmosphere even the most debased and irrational elements of Fascist ideology could thrive and grow in the minds of men like Chesterton with the seeming sanction of collectively accepted truths.

Indeed, what is so often ignored when Chesterton's contribution to B.U.F. ideology is under discussion, is the degree to which he gained his more extreme ideas from within the movement - as a result of concentrated exposure to these beliefs. This process of socialization must have been important as there is little evidence of such extreme, or systematic, anti-Semitism in his pre-Fascist writings. There can, of course, be no doubt that once he had taken these ideas on board he was one of those within the movement principally to blame for the increasingly anti-Semitic tone of the Party's propaganda. But this by no means proves that he came into Fascism primarily motivated by a wish to indulge in racist anti-Semitism beneath a thin veneer

of Fascist idealism.

Fired with Fascist enthusiasm Chesterton quickly absorbed the anti-Semitic ethos of the B.U.F. and was soon employing his formidable propagandist's talents in a sustained polemical tirade against Fascism's perceived opponents - the Jews, democracy, Communism, liberalism, decadence, cosmopolitanism, pacifism - and an equally vehement defence of its aims and ideals as he saw them - authoritarianism, leadership, Spenglerian historiography, the new patriotism and imperialism, and the corporate state. In his earliest columns he wrote under the heading of "Fascism Calling" and ranged over many aspects of basic Fascist philosophy, from its opposition to democracy, through the role of 'intellectuals' in the movement and under a Fascist regime, to its relationship with socialism.<sup>23</sup> But it was his anti-Semitic pieces that gained him the most recognition within the movement and the most notoriety amongst its opponents. They established him as one of the movement's leading racists - a man to be spoken of in the same breath as William Joyce.

By the end of 1934 Chesterton was generally accepted as a leading Party spokesman, with a vast output of articles and public speeches and at the great meeting in Hyde Park on September 14th 1934, he was the first speaker on the Leader's Platform. He was also in charge of replying to adverse comment in the press. During this period it would appear that one incident did disturb his complacency. Shortly before he returned to London in June 1934, Chesterton led his Midlands Blackshirts to Olympia for the great rally which was fated to culminate in a brutal brawl between Fascists and their opponents, spilling over into Fascist violence against a number of innocent

bystanders.<sup>24</sup> His wife recalls that:<sup>25</sup>

"He returned in the early hours of the morning exhausted, extremely angry and with his right fist bruised. But it was against the fascists he was fuming. It seems that at one point he had witnessed two fascists holding down a communist while another kicked the prostrate figure: 'So I hit one of the kinder', he told me. He would not stop talking about the unnecessary violence until he finally fell asleep vowing 'I will resign tomorrow'. But next morning he had decided to stick with Mosley arguing that really the communists had provoked the overreaction which was still a clear breach of fascist discipline."

Back in the atmosphere of Fascist brotherhood Chesterton forgot such misgivings and in his special review of the meeting in The Blackshirt spoke of the Blackshirt Defence Force in glowing terms:<sup>26</sup> "This body, as always, performed magnificent service. Not a man hesitated to pounce upon his adversary, no matter how barbarous the weapon used against him."

Firmly established within the leadership Chesterton was chosen by Mosley for the task of investigating the role of Jews in British society. Chesterton later recalled that:<sup>26</sup>

"Genuinely puzzled (I have the clearest possible mental picture of him at the time) Mosley ordered a thorough research into the Jewish question, especially into the financial and political activities which the movement attacked, and it was then found that there was a very close identification between those activities and specific Jewish interests. Rightly or wrongly Mosley imagined that he had stumbled upon the secret of Jewry's bitter attack on his movement."

Chesterton published a summary of his conclusions in The Blackshirt which suggested that the Jews were the natural enemies of Fascism as they were deeply involved in almost every political and economic, not to mention cultural, practice opposed by the B.U.F.<sup>27</sup> It is ironic, however, that Mosley should have used Chesterton for this task of investigation. For by this time Chesterton was hopelessly prejudiced against the Jews and held a conspiratorial view of their dealings. The line between involvement and control had become blurred in his

thinking about the part played by Jews in national life and this may well explain why the full results of his 'researches' were never published by Mosley.

In 1936 Mosley appointed Chesterton as his official biographer. Again, this is an interesting choice, as Chesterton had never been one of the tiny inner circle who worked closely with Mosley (principally Alexander Raven Thompson, the movement's philosopher; Neil Francis-Hawkins, Director General of the B.U.F.; and Ian Hope Dundas, Mosley's Chief of Staff). Nor could he have known Mosley socially for, as Skidelsky remarks: "Public and private lives were kept in rigidly separate compartments. No fascist lieutenants ever came to Denham."<sup>28</sup> And Mosley only visited the Chestertons at home once. At this meeting a photograph was taken of the two tall men standing side by side in the garden, Mosley looking suitably leaderlike and Chesterton looking considerably ill at ease.<sup>29</sup> The choice of Chesterton was probably in recognition of his gifts as a writer. *But it also* suggests that Mosley trusted Chesterton and was not afraid to reveal private details to him. One Fascist reviewer of the completed biography wrote that Chesterton had had: "the advantage of knowing personally the Leader..."<sup>30</sup> Another enthused that: "Chesterton has had a unique opportunity of observing Sir Oswald in all his phases at National Headquarters and every available source of reference has been open to him for the compilation of this book."<sup>31</sup>

This is borne out in a long letter which was written by Chesterton in 1943 in protest against the continued incarceration of Mosley as a traitor, which was never sent for publication and remained with the Chesterton Papers. In it



he wrote that:<sup>32</sup>

"Having once been in daily contact with Mosley, and getting to know his mental processes very well, I can assure you that, whatever the shortcomings of his temperament may be, he is the last man in Britain against whom a suspicion of disloyalty may justly be entertained."

The finished book, entitled Portrait of a Leader, was, on the whole, a straightforward propaganda work (aptly named a "hagiography" by Skidelsky) which Chesterton later came deeply to regret having written. The work was destined to have wider implications for Chesterton as the Nazis published a German edition in 1937, with a new introduction written by Chesterton.\* Although this had little impact in wider Germany it did bring Chesterton to the attention of Nazi officials and in 1938, after he had left the B.U.F., an unofficial offer was made to him of a post as a propagandist based in Berlin. Chesterton, angry that they should even think that he would turn traitor, turned the offer down in no uncertain terms.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, by 1936, Chesterton was one of Mosley's leading lieutenants. But during that year he suffered a nervous breakdown brought on by overwork and a consequent return to alcoholism. His wife recalled that: "At this time Kenneth was also finding it difficult to sleep because of recurring nightmares of the horrors of the First World War. This, combined with his selfless work for Mosley, proved to be too much even for his iron constitution.... Mosley was very kind to him and suggested that a German doctor he knew would cure him..."<sup>34</sup>

This led to Chesterton travelling to Germany, where he spent

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\*Mosley, Geschichte und Programm des Britischen Fascismus, Verlag E.A. Seemann, Leipzig, 1937.

the six months of the winter of 1936-37, mixing convalescence with observation of life under the Nazis. This latter activity was assisted, as Chesterton acknowledged at the time, by "one able to command the opening of all gates"; presumably a senior Nazi Party official. The result was a major series of articles which appeared in The Blackshirt in the spring and early summer of 1937, under the general title of "Aspects of the German Revolution." These articles, for all their expected praise, also contain a curious lack of conviction about life in Nazi Germany at times.

Recalling one incident Chesterton remarked that:<sup>35</sup>

"Not altogether having escaped the effect of continuous anti-Nazi propaganda I believed it to be necessary to frame every remark to my German friends with the utmost caution....For instance, I was instrumental in bringing together a distinguished Party official and a no less distinguished professional man, and as we were walking through the park we passed some tiny tots in uniform, apparently not long emerged from the toddler stage, who greeted us with a smart salute and brisk pipings of 'Heil Hitler'.

'You certainly believe in catching them young', I remarked. 'Yes indeed!' replied the professional man. 'We shall soon have a special uniform designed for the embryo.'

I gave a quick and apprehensive glance in the direction of the huge Nazi official by my side, but I need not have worried: he was chuckling with delight.."

On another occasion he recorded a conversation with an "evangelical priest" who was also a Party member:<sup>36</sup>

"...he kept on making sneering remarks such as 'Hitler's so-called Folk-Community'.

'Why so-called?' I enquired.

'Because it is incapable of being realized.'

'Yet you are a Hitler man. Why do you support policies you believe to be unattainable?'

'There are degrees of support', he said vaguely.

I made a mental note of the infinite superiority of German Communists over those miserable creatures who batten on a regime what their own egotism will not allow them boldly to uphold."

In another conversation, this time with a man on a train who sported a Party badge, Chesterton ventured to ask why he wore

this mark of devotion: "... 'There are business advantages.' Replied this fine specimen of an idealist."<sup>37</sup>

He also recorded his astonishment at the fact that the Nazis refused to describe their economy as properly corporate:<sup>38</sup>

"In spite of these great and comprehensive duties and powers of intervention, the German authorities, for some reason I do not pretend to understand, fight shy of describing the totality of their efforts as a 'planned economy'."

Nor could he understand the efforts of the Nazis to discredit the Catholic Church and its adherents. After attending a major speech by Goebbels in the Deutscher Halle in Berlin, on the subject of "some ecclesiastical morals"<sup>39</sup>, Chesterton chose to finish the series of articles on German life on this question. He began by avowing that while in Germany he had refused to take sides on the issue, in spite of attempts made by friends and "others" to involve him. After bending over backwards to see things from the Nazis' point of view, he concluded with the following thoughts:<sup>40</sup>

"This is not to say that I think the action of the German Government has always been wise, at any rate so far as some aspects of the Catholic question are concerned. Undue sensitivity to foreign criticism seems to me a German failing, and to respond to that criticism, however unjust it may be, in such a way as to give the world an erroneous impression of religious persecution within the Reich is not statesmanship at its best. For instance, Catholics the world over have naturally been offended by the fact that recent criminal trials should have been flung in their faces in a manner suggesting that as a community they are less moral than any other community..."

His wife remembered that his visit raised some doubts in his mind about the Nazi system: "He was particularly disturbed by listening to one of Goebbels' speeches in which he attacked the Catholic Church and Catholics in general." Such misgivings may help to explain why the series peters out on this note of

dissension on Chesterton's part, while those sentiments expressed by Chesterton which most unreservedly praise the Nazis appear in the highly stylised format of Party propaganda statements:<sup>41</sup>

"As one who for nearly six months studied conditions in Germany: as one who has seen the work of the N.S.D.A.P. in many of its phases, and talked about the Party with thousands of Germans who were not Party members, I feel that I can with confidence, on behalf of my Leader and all my colleagues, write this message to the splendid Nazi manhood and womanhood of Germany, old strugglers and young enthusiasts alike. 'Comrades! The Blackshirts of Britain salute you!  
'Heil Hitler'."\*

Returning from Germany free from alcoholism and feeling much better, Chesterton was promoted by Mosley. A special notice was printed in Action,<sup>42</sup> mentioning his breakdown in health which had lasted for "more than a year" (as early as 1935 he had been forced to withdraw from activism briefly)<sup>43</sup> and spoke of his having undergone "special treatment abroad". It told of how he was to be promoted to the position of "Director of Publicity Propaganda", and suggested that "on his shoulders will fall the task of creating new propaganda and publicity and acting in a general advisory capacity to the leader on these subjects." Shortly afterwards he was also made editor of Blackshirt, reaching the height of his powers within the Party. It was the summer of 1937 and he was not only involved in these roles, but was also writing articles for all the other B.U.F. publications and involving himself in street demonstrations and even in billposting. This last practice caused Chesterton

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\*Not, of course, that Chesterton was actively hostile to the Nazi system. He was largely taken in by what he was allowed to see of Hitler's Germany and this will be dealt with below in the next section of the chapter.



**McNab, Chesterton & Beckett in Throgmorton Street last Thursday. See story on page 5.**

Spreading the word in 1936.



(Associated Press)

3rd October 1937

(below) The head of the South London march. Neil Francis-Hawkins and Major General J. F. C. Fuller are marching on either side of Sir Oswald Mosley. Marching side by side on the extreme left are A. K. Chesterton (in dark suit, looking straight ahead) and A. Raven Thomson (with moustache, looking towards the camera)

(Daily Herald)







Doris Chesterton and A.K. together in their garden in 1937.

great embarrassment when, in October 1937, he was discovered by the police. The Jewish Chronicle was delighted to report the outcome:<sup>44</sup>

"A.K. Chesterton, Editor of BLACKSHIRT, was with others last week bound over at Westminster Police Court in £2 for twelve months good behaviour. He pleaded guilty to being concerned in affixing and posting handbills worded 'Mosley Will Win' and bearing a Fascist sign, at 3.45 am on Sunday at Imperial Chemical Industries House, Millbank, without the consent of the owner. He said he was carried away by his enthusiasm..."

The incident was doubly embarrassing to Chesterton, because earlier on that same evening he and his wife had entertained his old First World War commander, Colonel Walsh, a supporter of the B.U.F. and a man who held interests in I.C.I.<sup>45</sup>

Yet at this moment of peak involvement in the movement Chesterton was beginning to lose faith in Mosley's ability to free himself from the influence of the Party bureaucrats, led by Neil Francis Hawkins, who, according to Doris Chesterton, "was always a figure of fun to Kenneth."<sup>46</sup> Torn between his commitment to the cause and his loss of faith in the methods of the movement, Chesterton kept his disagreements largely to himself and only in one article, written in November 1937, does his anxiety surface clearly. In it he expresses the fear that the electoral needs of the Party were in danger of overwhelming its ideals:<sup>47</sup>

"If the British Union were merely another political party it would have nothing to offer Britain...It assumes the form of a political party only during the struggle for power. Thereafter it becomes what its name implies - the union of the British people...Therefore, British Union, while it uses political weapons, does not use them after the fashion of the political parties. Life without integrity is death, and in human affairs integrity is served only by ethics. The end does not justify the means unless the means be good, because evil means corrupt the end.

As far as humanly possible our grasp of this fact must be absolute: either we stand remorselessly for truth, with an adamant resolve to have done with shams, or else we are not the movement we believe, but part of that which we would destroy - just another political party scrambling and wrangling amongst other political parties down the slope of Britain's fall."



His fear was that the movement was becoming corrupted by the evil means necessary to gain power in a liberal democratic system and was turning into a conventional political party, that lies were being spread in order to gain more votes and that the strength of the movement was being grossly exaggerated in the process. Chesterton had himself, of course, always been able to write polemical propaganda - sometimes of the crudest kind - so long as he believed it to be true! But the moment he ceased to believe in the actual 'facts' of the Fascist case, he would withdraw his support, even if such information would further the cause of Fascism, for this he saw as trading off integrity against success.

Against him he found those senior administrators of the movement who had come to place the ideals of the Party and its organizational machine, over and above those of the movement. They had little interest in the notion of disbanding the Party after the assumption of power. For them the Party was Fascism. As such they gave Mosley their undivided support and thus bolstered his sense of self-importance, something increasingly important to him as his crusade disintegrated in internal bickerings and external indifference. The leading member of this group, Neil Francis Hawkins, Mosley's Director General, served his leader with unswerving loyalty and undoubtedly contributed much to keeping the movement going from day to day. He was a formidable opponent and one Chesterton could never hope to overcome.

Thus, by October 1937 Chesterton had decided to resign from active participation in the B.U.F. and sat down accordingly to draft a letter of resignation to his leader. It was Sunday October 10th and Mosley was due to give a speech in Liverpool

that same afternoon. That evening the news came through that Mosley had been injured by a brick thrown at his head during this meeting and would be out of action for some time.

Chesterton saw no option but to continue in the movement as he felt that he couldn't possibly desert him in his hour of need. He tore up his letter of resignation (which his wife, still resolutely anti-Fascist, gathered together and preserved in a desk draw against the day he would finally leave the B.U.F.)<sup>48</sup> and continued to edit Blackshirt. Early in 1938 he exchanged editorial chairs with Geoffrey Dorman and took over Action,<sup>49</sup> but with Mosley back in control he now felt free to resign and in the March 28th edition of Action he ended his editorial column "Reveille!" with his valedictory message:<sup>50</sup>

"May the creed advanced by this intrepid man win through to save our land, and may the policy he upholds with such skill and passion soon scatter the policies of darkness and treachery which now imperil the British race - that, readers of Action, is not only my valedictory message: it is, and shall remain, my prayer."

This was followed on a later page by a discreet note:<sup>51</sup>

"A.K. Chesterton wishes to announce that with the publication of this issue he resigns from the editorship of Action and from active membership of the British Union."

He retained his membership of the movement, hoping to go quietly, but within two weeks Mosley had criticised him in a public speech and he resigned from the movement altogether, issuing a pamphlet setting out his grievances and justifying his decision to break with his leader.

The pamphlet, entitled Why I Left Mosley,<sup>52</sup> accused Mosley of favouring the party bureaucrats at the expense of the ideals of the movement:

Over/.....

"In order to back up his favourites there is no affront which he will refuse to offer to common sense and no specious excuse he will hesitate to advance. If a leader shows himself unable to maintain even the pretence of a judicial attitude in dealing with his own organization, he can plead no convincing justification for the sacrifices which service to him impose."

Attacking the 'favourites' he began with Neil Francis-Hawkins:

"First the ringmaster of the whole circus who, as Director General, has been pre-eminently successful in securing unto himself every vestige of administrative power...Then there is the gentleman who pursues a barren course from branch to branch...instructing them - to show what flair he has in revolutionary propaganda - to go out and do what the inhabitants would be likely most to abominate - a clear injunction to brawl in church, to dilute the beer, to desecrate the war memorial and to kidnap on the eve of a Cup-Tie the star performer of their favourite football team. Yet this man is Mosley's chief contact with the membership!... Next comes an ex-Natal policeman, whose mind is even more innocent of political ideas and who accompanies Colonel Triplicate every week to the 'Leader's Conference', there to sit in unrelieved dumbness while matters of high policy are supposed to be discussed..."

But this was not simply another conspiracy theory of the 'great man' subverted by his closest supporters, for Chesterton blamed Mosley equally for the situation:

"But let nobody blame this coterie, imagining that it is something apart from its leader and alien to his spirit. This is a mistake too many of us made...The public aspect of this shows itself in [Mosley's] ...refusal to deal objectively with the Movement's fortunes. 'Flops' are written up as triumphs, and enormous pains are taken to titivate reports so as to give the impression of strength where there is weakness, of growth where there is declining influence.... In a recent issue of his journal there are two major attacks on the veracity of the National Press, and yet in this very issue, to my certain knowledge there were several statements which were sheer lies..."

Chesterton also made his own preferences clear in this attack:

"The most damning indictment of the BUF is its reckless irresponsibility towards the services of men who could have seen it through to victory - in organization, men like Forgan, Gueroult, Moore, Vincent; in propaganda Joyce, Beckett, Macnab, Probyn, and many others who rendered loyal and distinguished service...."

But while the main thrust of his argument was directed at Mosley

personally, accusing him of a personality weakness which had reduced the B.U.F. to little more than "a projection of his own ego", the pamphlet also contains evidence of his continued respect for Mosley, both as a man and a thinker:

"I am not able to make up my mind whether Mosley's qualities have deteriorated with the passage of time, or whether so many of us were wrong in the first place in attributing the rise of what was a superb revolutionary movement solely to the genius of its creator. The truth is probably that the spirit evoked four or five years ago - a spirit full of aspiration and daring, equal to any task - owed much of its inspiration to Mosley's great personality...I hail Mosley for his great gifts, but because of his great weaknesses I also say farewell..."

This was Chesterton's self-justification for his split with Mosley. But can we trust him? Surely this is simply propaganda designed to cover the only real dispute between them - the issue of Mosley's holding back on the anti-Semitic line in the B.U.F.? Doesn't Chesterton's avowed support for Joyce and Beckett (both dismissed by Mosley in 1937 for their extreme anti-Semitism) serve as a clue to this underlying dispute?

To some extent such a narrow view of the dispute has already been rejected, with Professor Skidelsky pointing to Chesterton's disenchantment with the drift within the movement towards open support for a distinctly Germanic form of National Socialism.<sup>53</sup> Also, Colin Cross highlights Chesterton's feeling that respect for truth within the movement had declined.<sup>54</sup> But Mosley always maintained that he expelled men like Chesterton for the extreme nature of their views on the Jewish question:<sup>55</sup>

"...men who wanted to get into any fight with a Jew whatever the reason; the hard core of hard-boiled anti-semites, to whom our struggle to avert the war presented the opportunity to get into an altogether larger affair, a bigger and better fight...it will be found that I soon eliminated these men from the party, if after due warning they persisted in utterances contrary to party policy. These are the people who believe in a world conspiracy run by the Jews...."

A recent study of the B.U.F. in the Birmingham area,<sup>56</sup> by John Brewer, suggests that Chesterton actually "favoured closer connections with Hitler" and also that:

"Being rabidly anti-Semitic in a movement now moved away from gutteral, abusive anti-Semitism, caused Chesterton to resign in the new year."

For Brewer it is a simple case of the "emotional" Chesterton against the "intellectual" trend within the movement, led by Raven Thompson and Francis Hawkins.\*

In order to begin to assess this complex issue it is necessary to look at the actions of the main participants in this minor drama enacted within the B.U.F., as too little is known about the real feelings of Chesterton and Mosley at the time of the split, and under such circumstances actions often speak louder than fiercely disputed words.

The first thing to note is the fact that Mosley made no attempt during Chesterton's period with the B.U.F. to block his rise through the movement. Indeed, in 1937, the year Chesterton began to lose faith in Mosley's leadership, Mosley promoted him to Director of Publicity Propaganda and editor of Blackshirt. Chesterton was also Mosley's chosen biographer and the man who undertook the research into the Jewish question upon which Mosley based his own anti-Semitism after 1936.

Mosley claimed that he could not exercise control over what appeared in the columns of his organization's propaganda organs, and there is undoubtedly some truth in this

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\*Just how Brewer came to the conclusion that Francis Hawkins was an intellectual in comparison to Chesterton is difficult to imagine. He was a first-class administrator it is true, but not an intellectual. Brewer's work shows a propensity to accept too simplistic a set of theoretical constructs with regard to internal B.U.F. disputes. Cf. J. Brewer: The British Union of Fascists, Sir Oswald Mosley and Birmingham, unpublished Birmingham University thesis, (M.Soc.Sci), 1975, pp172-189.

assertion. But this does not mean to say that he exercised no control at all. As Skidelsky has suggested the fact that during the period of the pact with Lord Rothermere's Publishing empire references to Jews vanished completely from the columns of the Blackshirt, shows that Mosley could exercise a veto over publications if he so desired.<sup>57</sup> Also, even if Chesterton was able to get his extreme anti-Semitic articles into the journals without Mosley's approval, surely the same cannot be true of those works which were reprinted as pamphlets. Such pamphlets were expensive to produce, represented the official policies and ideals of the B.U.F. and must have required the Leader's approval before going for publication. How was it then that one of Chesterton's most crude pieces of anti-Semitic writing - The Apotheosis of the Jew - came to be allowed into pamphlet form by Mosley?<sup>58</sup>

Mosley was also very kind to Chesterton, paying a good deal of the expenses for his visit to Germany in the winter of 1936/7. Just prior to Chesterton's return to active duty Mosley wrote to him in the following terms:<sup>59</sup>

"I am very glad to hear from Findlay that things are going well with you and that you hope to be able to return before you had expected.

Do not feel that our present necessities compel you to cut things short as you seem able to write about half the paper in the present circumstances and you are certainly writing at the top of your form. It will be a great thing to have you back on the spot again but don't take risks with your health before you and your Doctors are satisfied that all is well. There will be a great burden of work waiting for you in the future and you want to be thoroughly fit for it.

In the meantime I need not assure you that the great amount of writing you have been able to do at this juncture has been of inestimable service to the Movement, the paper has benefitted enormously from it. Thank you so much.

Yours in Union

O. Mosley.

Quite apart from Mosley's friendly tone this letter is interesting for the fact that Mosley suggests that Chesterton was writing at the top of his form. The letter is ~~dated~~ 14th April 1937, that is, shortly after Chesterton had written his Apotheosis of the Jew piece.

There is also the fact that Chesterton seems to have chosen his own time to leave. There seems little doubt that he resigned of his own free will, as he even had time to write his valedictory message and to insert the notice of his resignation in Action. Mosley was hardly backward in dismissing those with whom he fundamentally disagreed, as William Joyce and John Beckett discovered in 1937, (when they were summarily dismissed by Mosley, along with over 100 other salaried members of the Headquarters staff.) If Mosley had harboured similar feelings towards Chesterton there is little doubt that he too would have been instantly dismissed. Further, if Chesterton had been in total agreement with Joyce and Beckett on the nature of the split in 1937, he would surely have resigned in protest at their dismissal. He, too, was not backward when it came to splitting from those with whom he disagreed fundamentally.

Indeed, his relationship with Joyce is interesting in this regard. In 1953 Chesterton wrote to Mosley: "I have in my possession a long letter you wrote to me in 1937 denouncing what you called Joyce's treachery to you..."<sup>60\*</sup> It has been commonly assumed that, because Chesterton's Why I Left Mosley pamphlet bore the stamp of Joyce's pro-Nazi National Socialist

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\*Alas, the letter mentioned by Chesterton is missing from the Chesterton papers that I have seen.

League, he was a member of this group. The myth grew up at the time as is clear from the following extract from the Jewish Chronicle "The National Socialist League of Joyce and Beckett...seems to have done nothing except recruit A.K. Chesterton when he resigned from the B.U.F."<sup>61a</sup> Yet the N.S.L. mark on Chesterton's pamphlet is misleading. In fact, Chesterton was forced to go to Joyce, to have his comments printed as he wouldn't go to the anti-Fascist press and Joyce was the only person he knew with ready access to a printer.<sup>61b</sup>

Chesterton later wrote some articles for the Sunday Express on Joyce and in the original draft is a section which was never printed in the final draft. In it Chesterton deals with the question of his attitude towards Joyce in 1938:<sup>62</sup>

"Although I never belonged to his League, Joyce invited me on two occasions in 1938 to address its members. He brought the first of these two meetings to an end by calling for the National Anthem to be sung. That done, he shouted the Nazi cry of triumph SEIG HEIL. I did not attach importance to the episode, if only because the unpredictable little man was quite as capable of closing the meeting in Icelandic or Old Norse, both languages, incidentally, which he had mastered.

At the second meeting I expressed my concern at the growing danger of war. Joyce arose vehemently to dispute my contention. 'There will be no war,' he thundered, 'I trust Adolf Hitler to see to that.'...Something had happened to Joyce's clarity of vision. He had become incapable of seeing that the country's grotesque unpreparedness for war revealed during the Munich Crisis was more than sufficient reason for the Government's haste to rearm. Despite his frequent assertion that his National Socialist League was entirely British, his emotional identification with Germany increased as the months sped past.

When Hitler marched into Prague and saddled himself with a new racial minority, most of us who had sympathised with his work in uniting purely Germanic peoples recoiled in dismay. Not so Joyce."

Chesterton did not, then, plunge into an association with Joyce after his split with Mosley, preferring a more nationalist form of Fascism.



On the whole, therefore, the actions of Mosley and Chesterton do tend towards Chesterton's interpretation of events. The most plausible explanation seems to be a combination of Mosley's pro-German line and preoccupation with administrative matters, coupled with a clash of personalities between Chesterton and various members of the administrative elite of the movement.\* There is little evidence to support the view that Chesterton was dismissed by Mosley, or that he left because he couldn't express his views in print. Nor would it seem that Mosley was particularly hostile either to Chesterton, or his ideas. Both men were prone to exaggerating the faults of their opponents when on the attack and this no doubt spilled over into their public recriminations against each other. Nor can there be any doubt that Chesterton's line within the B.U.F. was hopelessly utopian, given the political context within which the movement was operating. Nonetheless, it would not seem that he was deliberately forced out of the Party because of his anti-Semitic views.

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\*In a cryptic note scribbled on the back of a childhood photograph of himself, Chesterton wrote: "Hoare is to Mussolini as Box is to Mosley/Eden is to Mussolini as Dundas is to Mosley." He detested the leading politicians Hoare and Eden and therefore the message is clearly one of contempt for Box and Dundas. F.M. Box, and ex-Conservative Party Headquarters man, was Mosley's Director of Organization and (significantly) along with John Beckett attempted to reorganize the B.U.F. along conventional political party lines. Ian Hope Dundas, another ex-Tory Party worker, was Mosley's Chief of Staff. [The photograph upon which the lines are scribbled is in the possession of Doris L. Chesterton.] Mrs Chesterton recalls that Chesterton's best friend in the movement was John Beckett. Beckett was a former Labour M.P. and an even more extreme anti-Semite than Chesterton (joining Joyce in the N.S.L., although he resigned because he couldn't take Joyce's virulent form of the prejudice). He shared with Chesterton an open sense of humour. (Mrs Chesterton remembers him as "...roguish' in the endearing sense" - Interview, May 9th, 1978, p4). She also recalls that: "With John and Kenneth the relationship consisted of many quarrels but they remained friends without ever really clicking intellectually." (Interview, July 18th, 1978, p3).

## Part 2

An Apotheosis of Anti-Semitism?

There can be no doubt that Chesterton's Fascist anti-Semitism is the most visible trend within his thinking at this time. It 'inspired' some of his most 'memorable' front-page headlines in Blackshirt and Action and drew from him more exaggerated polemic than any other single subject he chose to deal with. It is that portion of his Fascism for which he was bound to be remembered — and rightly so in one sense, as it provides an object lesson in blind folly. But at the same time it has tended to attract the attention of those students of British Fascism who are particularly interested in the anti-Semitic aspect of the B.U.F ,with the result that the rest of Chesterton's Fascist ideals have remained largely ignored (except for the briefest remarks, made in passing, in more general works on the subject).\*

Nor have those works which have dealt with his anti-Semitism undertaken any really detailed analysis of his beliefs in this respect, but have relied instead upon using his most extreme statements in isolation to illustrate their case. (Significantly, the only major exception to this trend, Richard C. Thurlow's work on Chesterton's ideology, concludes that his ideas were: "akin to patterns of thought prevalent in pre-Nazi German Conservatism",\*\* rather than to Nazism itself.) This, in turn, has led to a tendency

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\*Cf. W.F. Mandle: Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists, Longmans, London, 1968, passim; Gisela C. Lebzelter: Political Anti-Semitism in England, 1918-1939, Macmillan, London, 1978, passim; Colin Holmes: Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939, Edward Arnold, London, 1979, passim.

\*\*See above, Introduction, piii.

to view Chesterton as a standard "authoritarian personality"; a "classically prejudiced" individual, who, in the words of Joachim C. Fest, was:<sup>63</sup>

"Impelled towards politics in the first instance not by an overwhelming idea but by psychological conflict, whatever ideological constructions were erected to obscure this fundamental fact.....concerned not so much to realize a dream of the future as to work off an instinctual urge."

From this belief it is easy to assume, as W.F. Mandle does, that we are dealing with an extreme anti-Semite who saw in the B.U.F. a chance to spread the word about Jewish machinations and attack the Jews from within the collective security of Fascism:<sup>64</sup>

"..we have...seen that there was something of a predisposition to anti-Semitism. With anti-Semites such as William Joyce and A.K. Chesterton already highly placed, it could hardly have been otherwise. We may say that the attitude towards the Jews had toughened in the BUF by the end of 1933..."

Thus Joyce and Chesterton are lumped together (as they so often are) and it is assumed that Chesterton, like Joyce, was an extreme anti-Semite of long standing. Chesterton's influence over events in the Party must indeed have been strong as he had only been in the movement for a little over a month by the end of 1933 and was the movement's Midlands organizer.

Of course, such beliefs would be easy to substantiate if Chesterton could be made to fit into the psycho-pathological model of the authoritarian personality. Then we could relax with a comfortable fit between all the various elements of his Fascist ideology and the fundamental irrationality of a single-minded drive towards genocide. Psychologically disturbed individuals do not require even an internally coherent meaning system to function within the politics of prejudice. The classically prejudiced person must pursue his instinctual urge to attack the Jews to its logical conclusion - physical annihilation.

In Chapter One, however, the question of Chesterton's childhood and upbringing were related to his adult personality and it was suggested that he deviated on many counts from the norm of authoritarianism. Nothing which has occurred since in the analysis has suggested that this conclusion should be modified. In all the years leading up to his acceptance of the Fascist creed he displayed a consummate ability to deal with the admixture of love and hate which is usually so destructive of the authoritarian individual. His marriage to a convinced Socialist and pacifist is a case in point, for Doris was not silent in her dissensions from his Fascist opinions:<sup>65</sup>

"..it was always a problem for Kenneth to understand why, since he respected my intellect, I could never be convinced of 'the cause'. It was especially puzzling to him that when we had a serious political disagreement that in the end our efforts had to end in an agreement to differ...."

And yet he would fly to her defence if any of his political allies allowed their attacks on her ideas to slip into personal criticism.<sup>66</sup> He was also one of the few leading anti-Semites within the B.U.F. to have a close Jewish friend during the 30s. Joseph Leftwich, a leading Conservative member of the orthodox Jewish community in Britain was impressed by the non-anti-Semitic side of Chesterton's Fascism and wrote to him accordingly. Later the two met and during the late thirties the two families would meet regularly for a meal at each other's houses.<sup>67</sup> Such a friendship was impossible for men like Joyce and Beckett to even contemplate. Nor had Chesterton, in his career as a journalist and drama critic, ever needed to indulge in anti-Semitism in order to function efficiently in these demanding roles. In short, there is little evidence that before he turned to Fascism he had any particular need to hate Jews qua Jews.

But if Chesterton does not fit the psychological predisposition model of Fascism very well, neither does he fit that of the frightened petit bourgeois, threatened with a loss of status, or economic ruin. His decision to join Mosley was taken at a time when he could have accepted Sir Archie Flower's offer to become the chief publicity officer of the Stratford Memorial Theatre. Also Chesterton's background in journalism and dramatic criticism would always have stood him in good stead if he had decided to remain as a freelance in London. Like Mosley, in adopting Fascism he sacrificed a safe career.

Before going on to discuss the possible causes of Chesterton's turn to extreme anti-Semitism it is imperative that we should first undertake a brief, but depressingly characteristic, excursion through his most extreme Fascist anti-Semitism.

Among the many insults he hurled at the Jews were the following particularly nasty examples, drawn from a variety of B.U.F. sources: "a gang of greasy gesticulating Jews...this alien rabble"; "No Jew-Red mob has the power to daunt us"; "a rabble race"; "the Judaic-Bolshevik Soviet slave-state"; "blood-cousins of the maggot and the leech".<sup>68</sup>

His most famous and oft-quoted anti-Semitic piece was first published in the British Union Quarterly, of April-June 1937 - "The Apotheosis of the Jew". What follows contains the main thrust of Chesterton's argument in this piece:<sup>69</sup>

"...the entire tragedy of the Jew...is due to his devastating sense of inferiority...Because of this terrible knowledge there is aroused in him a compensatory itch to dominate the world...he could not fail to conquer were it not for the inevitable arrogance that sooner or later attends upon his half success...."

Continued/.....

"...unfortunately his migration to more temperate zones, and the consequent approximation of his skin to the colour of white, has led to him finding himself both at home and not at home among races with a poise, a simplicity and a tradition of dash and daring, of love and song and laughter which is sometimes possible for him to ape but never to absorb...his race and the way of life of his race are inferior things. [Arriving in Britain] He lives for a time on the smell of an oil-rag while he brings his age long instincts of the bazaar to bear...The next stage is...Eton and Balliol [and] an accent which would bring no disgrace upon a B.B.C. announcer...[Yet he retains] the race consciousness which keeps him in contact with similar upstarts in every part of the world...It is now that the Jew stands on the verge of world domination. Accepted by society in its decadence...And at this precise moment the collective neurosis of his race, its age-long sense of inferiority, arises in the form of unparalleled effrontery and arrogance to bring about his defeat...the 'English' Jew finds beside him, rubbing shoulders in high places, the semi-literate, demi-semi-Anglicised Yid...debasement of culture to the lowest levels gives him a tremendous advantage [in modern society] since in the universal language of vulgarity the Jew is the world's master Esperantist...Are the films trash? Then the Jew makes a fortune out of them, because it is his natural gift to purvey trash...Financially, socially, politically, culturally, the Jew has brought all things down to the level at which he feels most at home...To go to a swimming-pool anywhere near London or the large cities is as efficacious as baptism in the Jordan; one becomes positively annointed with Semitic grease...."

Less famous, but equally appalling, is the piece he wrote after a B.U.F. march to Trafalgar Square in 1937, during which violent abuse was shouted at the marchers by anti-Fascist counter-demonstrators:<sup>70</sup>

"opposition' was organized on a nation-wide scale by the Jew-Red conspiracy, and blessed by the stubborn and unscrupulous powers of reactionary capitalism...an obscene sub-human mass was allowed to block the adjacent streets [and] the Red, Yellow, and Blue Front imagined that it could be employed for ever to frustrate the advance of the British Union to power. [We could hear]...a concatenation of jungle noises from the distant mob...One had the impression that all the wildest and most obscene animals in creation had been packed into the street and bidden to roar, and howl, and rave, and generally to raise pandemonium, suggesting the complete dementia of all created things.

Continued/.....

"On the streets along which the huge Blackshirt columns passed the pavements were packed with deeply interested people, with only a fringe of Yids and their hooligan friends in front with faces distorted even beyond the unkind intention of Nature, all brandishing fatuous clenched fists, all howling out abuse at the top of their gutteral voices and indulging in the filthiest of gestures, especially when the splendid corps of Blackshirt women came within range of their obscene throats....[A group of protestors ran alongside the marchers presenting] perhaps the most fantastic escort ever to accompany a body of men on the march, consisting for the most part of Jewry's most unlovely specimens. These ape-like creatures literally danced along the road - a dance of sheer hysterical rage...this public hostility of London's hideous underworld of Jewish and synthetic Jewish morons provided propaganda of a value altogether beyond price...magnificent propaganda for National Socialism..."

And even when in a less angry and more thoughtful mood Chesterton was adamant over the need to attack the Jews as a group:<sup>71</sup>

"Fascist writers sometimes receive letters from Jews expressing regret that the scope of anti-Jewish attacks should be so wide...Most of us probably have some sympathy with this view, which is held by a number of intelligent and decent Jews, among them men who have had the courage to incur the displeasure of their fellow racials by publicly protesting against activities which make the name of Jewry stink.

Nevertheless, to have sympathy with this view is not to accept it. So long as the Jewish majority is pleased to link itself either with the subversive movements of the political 'Left', or with the damnable practices of the capitalist 'Right', the Jewish minority must suffer from whatever odium their colleagues bring upon them as a race...in every branch of capitalist brigandage which we have exposed the hand of the Jew has been revealed.

When we come to power we shall certainly deal with the lawless capitalist menace in its entirety, but we shall not fail to bear in mind the predisposition of the Jews in general to become part - and usually the chief part - of the conspiracy which fools and cheats people without ever rendering a useful service to the world in mitigation of the offence.

The Jew who is socially and economically harmless in the community need have no personal fear of Fascism in power, but only by implanting in what seems a large majority of his fellows a sense of economic and cultural decency will he be able to avert much legislation designed to give the people special protection against Jewry as a whole...If there be a tragedy in this, it is not Fascism which is to blame."

While in another article, written in a similar vein, he concluded:<sup>72</sup>

"In all sorrow I must advance the opinion that a race capable of so damnably violating the feelings of their British hosts is a rabble race, and that the sooner we get rid of the largest possible number of them and break their financial stranglehold the better it will be for the future greatness of the English people."

There is little point in continuing this dismal catalogue of prejudice as these statements represent the worst of his attacks on the Jews. As Mandle says: "What Fascist, after reading Chesterton...could not find grounds for dislike in the epitome of evil that was the BUF image of the Jew?"<sup>73</sup>

. But how are we to judge these outbursts. What does he mean by the Jewish "race"? The important distinction to be made in this respect is that while these extracts reek of cultural prejudice (ethnocentrism), conspiratorial anti-Semitism, and a tendency to lump all Jews together as a unified opposition group (categorical prejudice), there is little evidence of Chesterton's desire to exclude the Jews from humanity on biological grounds. To take the "Apotheosis" article as a case in point; the most crucial section of this piece is where Chesterton accuses the Jews of "financially, socially, politically, culturally," debasing national life; but not biologically. In another of the pieces Chesterton says that the Jew who is "economically and socially harmless" has little to fear from Fascism, and calls for more "economic and cultural decency" amongst Jews. The Jews are also associated with the revolutionary Left and the financial capitalist right by Chesterton in a classic conspiratorial model of events in world politics.

Nevertheless there are ambiguous statements in these pieces which can be interpreted as racial attributions of superiority



and inferiority on Chesterton's part. For instance he writes that the Jew's "race and the way of life of his race are inferior things". But if one looks at the previous characterisation of what Chesterton considers the superiority of the British "race" they are all cultural attributes - "poise", "simplicity", "tradition of dash and daring, of love and song and laughter". Far more suspect are those statements in which Chesterton relates Jewish skin colour to the Middle East and talks of becoming "positively annointed with Semitic grease" at swimming pools near to London. Worse still is his suggestion that they are "blood-cousins of the maggot and the leach".

There is little doubt that these are racial metaphors, but do they reveal a biological categorisation of the Jews by Chesterton? The answer would seem to be no. Many of his most ambiguous statements appear in his most heated pieces, written in the wake of street violence in which he had personally been involved and do not represent cool theoretical statements, but rather angry hittings out at what Chesterton saw as a violent enemy. Yet if this was so why did Chesterton use such language in his "Apotheosis" piece? The answer would seem to lie in the fact that there was a racial element in Chesterton's thinking which, when he was polemicising against the Jews, could slip into his propaganda. For, with regard to the coloured peoples of the earth Chesterton was a deeply paternalist racialist.

This can be traced back to his South African childhood. Chesterton's racial categorisation of coloured peoples was based on a "common-sense" (rather than "scientific") ideology, as one would expect of beliefs based on childhood socialization. Thus, while he protested that he had struggled for forty years

to keep "Rosenberg's racial rubbish out of British patriotism", and attacked the "clotted nonsense preached by Houston Stewart Chamberlain",<sup>74</sup> his thinking did contain a belief in the basic racial difference between coloured and white peoples. Thus he wrote in 1948 that he did not: "take up any racial attitude except to abominate the intermixture of white and coloured peoples."<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in dealing with this issue in his post-Second World War writings Chesterton was quite open in displaying these sentiments. In 1958 he wrote that: "The one thing we must not allow them to do is to poison the bloodstream of those who are native here because no recovery of Britain's greatness could be expected from a mulatto nation."<sup>76</sup> While in another piece he wrote of the prospect for a racist of seeing mixed liaisons between white women and black men: "His disgust is not jealousy but a wrenching of the stomach at something deeply repugnant to his racial values that he so prizes."<sup>77</sup>

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, it is vitally important to note that Chesterton's anti-Coloured biological classification could never provide the impetus for genocide. For the image of the coloured person is that of an inferior being, incapable of organizing anything so threatening as a world conspiracy:<sup>78</sup>

"He has evolved quickness of eye, alertness of ear, keenness of nose. What else? A feckless disposition, a slothful nature, a credulity beyond belief...What of his arts? Apart from the art of war...he has none...What happens to the African when he becomes intractable, let Mau Mau attest."

Genocidal ideologies arise on the extreme-Right amongst those who adopt the potent mix of pseudo-scientific racial stratification and the conspiracy accusation against the Jews. For if the group under attack is not only considered to be a biological danger but

is also viewed as engaged in an inevitable struggle for the survival of the fittest in which it is armed with formidable, indeed potentially all-powerful, powers of cunning and ability, then total annihilation must be sought. This, as we shall see later,\* was what animated Hitler's anti-Semitism and provided the central dynamic of his Nazi creed. But it was not what underlay Chesterton's concern with the Jews. True, he believed them to be a unified conspiratorial group, but he did not believe that the struggle with them was biologically inevitable; nor did he believe that they possessed potentially irresistible powers. His whole Fascist outlook was basically optimistic with regard to the eventual triumph of the British "race" over their cosmopolitan rivals. As to his conception of "race" itself, with regard to the Jews Chesterton was basically an ethnocentrist, contrasting their stateless cosmopolitanism with British national cultural traditions in a most unfavourable manner.\*\*

The second point of interest to arise out of the comparison of Chesterton's Fascist attacks on the Jews with his subsequent preoccupation with coloured peoples is that, given his openness of expression when he employed biological racist insults against coloured peoples, one would anticipate that if he had held similar biological sentiments against the Jews he would not have been able to restrain them in his Fascist writings. Yet his Fascist anti-Semitism, disgusting in its metaphorical elaboration though

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\*See Below, pp 297-299.

\*\*See the discussion of Chesterton's neo-Spenglerian concepts for a full discussion of this aspect of his thinking. pp289-302.

it sometimes was, contained nothing to match the unashamed **biological** racial classification of his later anti-coloured writings. As we have seen, there is little doubt that Chesterton was largely able to write what he wanted while in the B.U.F. and even if this was not so, then it still has to be explained why, after his split with Mosley, his writings remained similarly 'restrained'? For there is no doubt that Joyce would have offered Chesterton a platform from which to preach open biological racism if he had so desired.

Given our understanding of this dichotomy between his cultural and conspiratorial anti-Semitism, and his racist anti-coloured ideology, we can come to understand the import of the following piece of Fascist writing. Chesterton is dealing with the various proposals for 'world government' put forward by liberal idealists like H.G. Wells, and he concludes that:<sup>79</sup>

"The breaking down of barriers would not be economical and political alone, but sociological, ethical and biological, so that the resultant amalgamation of descendents would no doubt be a handsome piebald in colour, and perhaps possess the physique of a Congo Pigmy, the mind of an Australian aborigine and the morals of the Levant."

Thus, while he assigns biological changes to the coloured peoples, he associates moral, that is social and cultural, decline with the Levant; a code word for the Jews. Here, then, we have the separation of his stereotypes fleetingly revealed in his Fascist writings.

Similar problems exist over the interpretation of Chesterton's offered 'solutions' to the Jewish problem. For instance, just how are we to judge the following examples?:<sup>80</sup>

Over/.....

"...the sooner we get rid of the largest possible number of them and break their financial stranglehold the better it will be for the greatness of the English people."

"Not that the streets of Merrie England shall flow red with blood...The Fascist revolutionary refuses to regard the lives of quacks and jugglers as sufficiently valuable to destroy. What shall be destroyed is the toleration which is their breeding ground, together with the political and economic systems which they have shaped so deftly to their heart's desire."

"Anti-Social elements must be socially destroyed: the unfit must be deprived of social and economic power. Otherwise there is surrender to decay."

We must, of course, absolutely condemn such sentiments, whatever the intention which might lie behind them; but do they represent a 'final solution' of genocidal import? The first thing to note is the references to economic, social and political grievances harboured by Chesterton towards the Jews. It is these freedoms that he is proposing to limit. Yet the fact remains that he speaks of getting rid of the largest possible number. In what sense does he mean "get rid of"? To answer this one has to look elsewhere, to the following piece:<sup>81</sup>

"If it were possible for us to become insulated, were it but for a year, I believe our people would steadily rediscover the lost soul of their race. One thing at least would result - the creation of a further refugee problem elsewhere, due to the inability of cosmopolitan values to exist in the sunlight of an awakened English consciousness....."

Here is clear evidence that Chesterton believed that physical separation should be the last resort in dealing with the Jewish peoples in Britain. To a truly genocidal consciousness, like that of Hitler, driven on by personal psychology and biological determinism, this is a laughable statement. The lesson to be learnt from all this is that while Chesterton's cultural and conspiratorial anti-Semitism was no less irrational than Hitler's racialist conspiratorialism, it is qualitatively different in its implications for policy. For it leads to a

'utopian' vision of separation and forced emigration, rather than to the genocidal solution.

Finally, while we are on the subject of the ~~di~~fferences that existed between Hitler and Chesterton, there remains the thorny problem of Chesterton's visit to Nazi Germany and his continued support for Hitler's totalitarian system after that trip. The series of articles he wrote based upon his experiences do contain certain elements of doubt, it is true. Nevertheless they also contain some startling errors of judgement:<sup>82</sup>

"nobody with the slightest knowledge can deny the fact that coercion is the last of the methods which the N.S.D.A.P. desires to use. The revolution is essentially one of reason and persuasion, and a great part of the present day effort consists in letting the people know what the Americans call 'the big idea'...Naturally enough there are still malcontents who complain against the regime...Naturally, too, there have been instances of Party Officials acting beyond their proper bounds...."

"the concentration camps which the gullible British people imagines to be crammed with people who cannot accept National Socialist principles do not exist. Nobody in Germany has been punished because of his opinions - that is since Hitler came to power."

How could Chesterton possibly have believed this to be true unless he was trying to white-wash the brutality of Nazism? To begin with it must be remembered that his Fascist ideals predisposed him to accept much of what he saw as good. In this context it is worthwhile quoting at some length from the experiences of Howard K. Smith, the American correspondent of United Press in Berlin. Smith, in his book Last Train From Berlin, recalls his own first experiences of life in Hitler's Reich which, by coincidence, were also in 1936. His testimony is most interesting:<sup>83</sup>

Over/.....

"The first and most general of these passive impressions was good beyond all expectation. On first glance, Germany was overwhelmingly attractive, and first impressions disarmed many a hardy anti-Nazi before he could lift his lance for attack. Germany was clean, it was neat, a truly handsome land. Its big cities were cleaner than big cities ought, by custom, to be. You could search far and wide through Berlin's sea of houses or Hamburg's huge harbour district, but you could never find a slum or anything approaching one. In the countryside, broad, flourishing acres were cut into neat checkerboards, and no square foot of land was wasted. People looked good. Nobody was in rags, not a single citizen. They were all well dressed. And they were well fed. The impression was one of order, cleanliness and prosperity - and this has been of immense propaganda value to the Nazis...\* that is the general impression number one to every visitor to Germany, valid or not.....The second impression, a more specific one, followed hard on the heels of the first, if it was not coeval with it. It was - uniforms and guns; the amazing extent to which Germany, even then, was prepared for war. It took my breath away...On trains, all day long, one passed long railway caravans of camouflaged tanks, cannon and war-trucks lashed to railway flat cars, and freight depots were lined with more monsters hooded in brown canvas. In large towns, traffic had to be interrupted at intervals on some days to let cavalcades of unearthly machines, manned by dust-covered, steel-helmeted, Men-from-Mars roar through the main streets in manoeuvres.

The reaction that belongs to stage number two was one of titillation. Or, more than that, it was downright exciting.... And as newness loses its grip on your faculties, your brain silently muscles in on territory that had belonged entirely to your senses...And this, in one form or another, is just the way almost every visitor to Germany I met slid imperceptibly from stage two of his passive impressions to stage three. You begin to grasp that what was happening was that young humans, millions of them, were being trained to act merely upon reflexes."

For a highly intelligent sceptic like Smith, the whole process took only a month, the length of his initial visit, to complete. But, for a man like Chesterton, assigned a senior Party official to guide him (albeit based upon Chesterton's "free choice" of venue) and imbued with Fascist idealism? A man fresh from London with its abominable slums of the period? As Smith remarked:

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\*Perceptively, Smith notes that most of the slums were in fact removed by local and national socialist governments when the Nazis "were still a noisy minority chalking swastikas on back-alley fences! He also points out that the German people are "by their very nature clean and thrifty."

"every German I met leaned over backward to oblige; everyone was friendly and most were downright voluble."<sup>84</sup> Under these circumstances how could Chesterton be expected ~~to~~ break through the first impression stage? Indeed, the fact that he had any reservations at all is surprising. One didn't have to be a Fascist to be taken in, sometimes for long periods, by Hitler's Third Reich. As Smith recalled:<sup>85</sup>

"the only variation in the pattern of passive impressions was the rapidity with which different individuals completed the entire scale of them. Some people, sharp and sensitive, could run through the entire gamut in a week, which was unusually good. Some it took several years, and only the outbreak of war forced the last stages on their minds."

But, quite apart from his commitment to Fascism, Chesterton carried a legacy from the past which helped still further to dim his critical faculties when it came to accepting the Nazi claims that there was no policy of brutal repression and death camps under the Hitler regime: he had fought in the trenches of the First World War. As such he was a party to the absolute lack of faith in Allied propaganda, caused by the mixture of mistakes and downright lies it so often contained with respect to the practices of the German troops. Much of this propaganda was aimed at discrediting the German military machine, and bolstering the image of the Allied war effort.

Worst of all were the rumours, myths and legends that arose among Allied troops (and the German forces in the field) to fill the vacuum left by the general lack of faith in printed material. This too was often exploited by the Allied propagandists who either introduced the stories, or made sure that they were given credence and spread amongst the troops. From this "prodigious renewal of oral tradition" appeared such stories as the "Crucified Canadian" and German "corpse rendering factories". The former



tale claimed to relate to an incident in which German troops had spread-eagled a captured Canadian soldier on a cross, his hands and feet pierced by bayonets, in full view of his comrades in the Allied trenches. The second myth, of greater interest here, told of a corpse rendering factory made necessary by the great scarcity of fats in Germany, consequent upon the Allied success in blockading the enemy at sea. Corpses were taken from the battlefield, it was said, and rendered down for use as nitroglycerine, candles, industrial lubricants and boot-dubbing. Even during the hostilities the troops came to completely distrust the allied media. Siegfried Sassoon summed up this contempt in his poem "Fight to the Finish", which includes the lines:<sup>86</sup>

"I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;  
And with my trusty bombers turned and went  
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament."

After the war this sense of outrage increased when it became perfectly clear that the atrocity rumours were fakes, often deliberately designed to blacken the enemy's standing.

Chesterton's anger at this revelation was bound up with his general attack on the forces that he saw as causing the war and, from the cessation of hostilities, he was almost as pro-German as pro-British (at least with regard to the common people).

Thus he wrote that:<sup>87</sup>

"What did arise in the Front Line constituted the one eternal value which emerged from the whole conflict, and that was the capacity of men to remain steel-true to the trust reposed in them... This was the one real value created by the war, and it is revered as imperishable by the fighting men of both sides, who see in it a sacred possession belonging to neither victor nor vanquished, but to all brave men who love their country and are not afraid to die..."

But can we really suggest that Chesterton's former experiences

of anti-German propaganda continued to exercise his mind almost twenty years later? The following extract is taken from an article written in 1937:<sup>88</sup>

"War-time propaganda however, showed the great press magnates how infinite were the possibilities of fooling public opinion through the vehicle of the printed word - as, for instance, the notorious lie about German 'corpse factories' for obtaining grease."

In the light of this, the fact that Chesterton was unable to appreciate the truth of the Concentration Camp rumours emanating from Germany, and even defended the Nazis on this point, appears less sinister than it might otherwise.

After all, the Nazis would hardly have taken Chesterton to see an establishment of which they denied the existence.

Much of the evidence brought in to show how we can understand Chesterton's occasional use of biological racist metaphors and statements which are ambiguous on the issue of the 'final solution' to the Jewish problem, is linked to the application of what might be called a non-inductivist historical perspective. That is, it is assumed that the use of such metaphors and analogies cannot be judged with reference to today's interpretations of their meaning. For these concepts have not remained universally valid in their meanings over time. Thus, it is assumed that Chesterton was acting at the time within a historical context (inter-war Britain) which precluded a wider understanding of the full import of his most extreme anti-Semitic metaphors, or of his support for Nazism. Simply because today there is widespread agreement on what <sup>Nazism stands for and what</sup> constitutes biological racist anti-Semitism in the writings of an anti-Semite - for instance the use of animal imagery, or talk of racial degeneration - this does not mean that we can induce from this a universal historical meaning for these phenomena.

An excellent example of this is provided by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the leading Fabian socialists, who wrote in the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century ideas. As a result, as Colin Holmes suggests:<sup>89</sup>

"Sidney Webb could turn his attention to the prospect of 'degeneration of type', 'race deterioration if not race suicide'....Individuals like Arnold White and Beatrice Potter could refer to Jewish immigrants having particular racial qualities which arose out of their cumulative historical experiences. But they did not then proceed to generalize about all Jews having such characteristics. Opposition of this kind turned upon race but could not be called racist....What further complicates analysis before 1914 is that the term 'race' was used in an even more general fashion to refer to a group sharing a community of cultural interests..."

Holmes sees this "diffuse conception of race" as arising out of the general intellectual climate of the period, which was permeated with Social Darwinism and the influence of neo-Lamarckian philosophy.<sup>90</sup>

In the context of the present study it is interesting to look at inter-war attitudes on the question of the Jews through the medium of G.K. Chesterton. There were many differences in the political ideologies of G.K. and A.K., and this may explain the relative scarcity of references made by A.K. to G.K.'s work. A.K. was always more at home with the simplistic conspiracy theories of his other cousin - Cecil Chesterton.<sup>91</sup> For G.K. was a true anti-intellectual intellectual, defending the "penny dreadful" literature of his age on the grounds of the universal validity of human tastes. Such reduction to the lowest common denominator was totally alien to A.K.'s aesthetic elitism. Additionally, G.K. argued that the ideals of the French Revolution - liberty, equality and fraternity - were only deprived of relevance by being falsely separated from Christianity. In many ways he

was simply a radical English Liberal and even his discovery of Roman Catholicism, relatively late in life, was in keeping with such beliefs, as Margaret Canovan shows in her political biography of G.K.<sup>92</sup> For he was a Catholic in the Thomist tradition, emphasising notions of natural law, popular sovereignty,

the right to resist bad government and to limit the wealth of the rich for the sake of the poor. In addition G.K. defended industrial action by workers, arguing that this was true popular democracy in the tradition of the democratic guilds and communes of the Middle Ages. He even attacked British persecution of the Boers in South Africa. Indeed, it was possible to quote G.K. against A.K., as George Orwell did so successfully in a Tribune article of 1943. Chesterton had attacked Orwell on the grounds that he, Orwell, did not accept the maxim 'My country - right or wrong', adding that "all of us believe that whatever her condition Britain must win this war, or for that matter any other war in which she is engaged". To which Orwell delivered this crushing repost:<sup>93</sup>

"The operative phrase is any other war. There are plenty of us who would defend our country, under no matter what government, if it seemed that we were in danger of actual invasion or conquest. But 'any war' is a different matter. How about the Boer War, for instance? There is a neat little bit of historical irony here. Mr A.K. Chesterton is the nephew\*of G.K. Chesterton, who courageously opposed the Boer War, and once remarked that 'My country, right or wrong', was on the same moral level as 'My mother, drunk or sober'."

Yet, in spite of the many differences between the two men, there are many elements in G.K.'s writings which find an echo, or parallel, in A.K.'s work. For instance, G.K. frequently attacked what he termed "materialistic determinism",

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\*In committing this error George Orwell joins a long list of people who confused the second cousin status of the two men.

stressing instead the power of mysticism against the scientifically minded social analysts of his day. He likened their rationalism and adherence to systematic logic to the delusions of madmen. Always the master of the paradoxical phrase he concluded that therefore, the lunatic is "a man who has lost everything except his reason." These sentiments are reminiscent of those expressed by A.K. in those early articles on aesthetics which had appeared in the Johannesburg Star in 1922.\*

G.K. also totally deplored the effects of industrialism upon the poor and sought to return to the moral economy of the Medieval Guilds and the ethical codes of the Catholic Church and State of the period. Doctrines of "progress", which suggested that the changes were a necessary part of an inevitable improvement in the lot of mankind, drew from his pen total scorn: "This is the huge modern heresy of altering the human soul to fit its conditions, instead of altering human conditions to fit the human soul".<sup>94</sup> These were sentiments close to A.K.'s heart.

His patriotism was also, in some ways, similar to A.K.'s. He made a distinction between patriotism and imperialism, and in the light of this dichotomy, attacked both Communism and Toryism as imperialist. Like A.K. he saw the British Conservatives as simply self-interested bourgeois monopolists. But he differed from A.K. in believing that this meant that the concept of patriotism should be concentrated in the nation state and not diffused into the Empire.

G.K. was also very similar to A.K in his belief that man is

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\*See above, Chapter 5, p179, End Note 52.

a volitional being, able to transform the world by his actions and, therefore, armed with the power to make decisive choices. The doctrines of 'progress' and 'efficiency' were designed to relieve mankind of its ultimate responsibility to recognize moral decline and reverse the trend if and when it occurred. G.K. was, of course, inspired by a belief that Catholicism provided the correct moral blueprint. But, like A.K. he believed that men can only stand against the tide of history and defy the destructive trends of the time if they are armed with faith in a definite ideal.<sup>95</sup> Also like A.K. he had already discovered the moral principles before coming to the creed (in his case Catholicism) which rationalized this pre-existing ethical and political philosophy.<sup>96</sup>

But the crux of this comparison lies in the similarity between the ideas of the two cousins which open both to the charge of racial anti-Semitism. For to G.K.'s mystical nationalism, anti-industrialism and guild socialism, must be added his disillusionment with British parliamentary democracy, which carried with it a hatred for plutocracy which was strongly marked by anti-Semitism.

In this respect his brother Cecil and collaborator, Hilaire Belloc were most influential upon G.K. In the early years of the century they had written a book entitled The Party System,<sup>97</sup> in which they attacked the notion of 'fair competition' between political parties. This they dismissed as a charade played for the mystification of the masses, by a small clique of interrelated families; a governing plutocracy open only to those willing and able to purchase entry into the oligarchy. The "Marconi Scandal", in which Cecil Chesterton played so central a part,<sup>98</sup> convinced them (and G.K.) that the Jews were deeply implicated in this

corrupt political system.

This belief, coupled with the visible decline of British economic wealth, exacerbated in the inter-war period by international depression and working class mass unemployment, led G.K. to vehemently attack what he saw as the increasing, self-interested, power of the new generation of monopoly capitalists - especially the bankers and financiers. As Canovan suggests, his writings were haunted by sinister plutocrats pulling strings to force the politicians to dance to their pre-arranged economic tunes.<sup>99</sup> He also complained that the supposedly free press was in the hands of a few rich men.

On the other hand, he also saw Communism as an absolute evil, engaged upon the covert destruction of true liberty and democracy all over the world. All that was necessary for him to do was to put the two halves of this world picture together to add up to the "Jew", which he did, and the following was the result: "The cosmopolitan Jews who are the Communists in the East will not find it so very hard to make a bargain with the cosmopolitan Jews who are the capitalists in the West."<sup>100</sup>

Like his Fascist second cousin, therefore, G.K. saw the Jews as engaged upon the destruction of civilization as he knew it. Why the Jews? Here, too, there are similarities. G.K. saw the Jews as nationally and culturally distinct and for him this was crucial:<sup>101</sup>

"Nationality is a thing like a Church or a secret society; it is a product of the human soul and will; it is a spiritual product. And there are men in the modern world who would do anything rather than admit that anything could be a spiritual product."

To him their descent, religion, history and culture, had all

conspired to give them a special, totally alien, character, which could only prove destructive of British nationality if allowed to develop unchecked within the nation. It was further his belief that if the Jews tried to merge with the host culture of any established nation-state, to become Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, or Englishmen, this could only lead to distrust and hostility, as they would continue to operate as aliens in spite of this surface blending\* Spiritually, they would remain Jews, wedded to the principles of finance capitalism, or Communism, depending on their personal inclinations and preferences.

Thus, for G.K., as for A.K., the 'Jew' appears as a bad influence in national politics, because of his supposed economic and social proclivities; and, in seeking to put forward this opinion in his writings, G.K. too lay himself open to the accusation of 'racial' anti-Semitism and pro-Nazism.

Take, for instance, his insistence that it would be better if the Jews were to be forced by law to wear Middle Eastern dress:<sup>102</sup>

"A number of points upon which the unfortunate alien is blamed would be much improved if he were, not less of an alien, but rather more of an alien....The bright colours that make the Margate Jews hideous are no brighter than those that make the Moslem crowd picturesque. They are only worn in the wrong place, in the wrong way, and in conjunction with a type and cut of clothing that is meant to be more sober and restrained....But let there be...one simple and sweeping law about Jews... that every Jew must be dressed like an Arab. Let him sit on the Woolsack, but let him sit there dressed as an Arab. Let him preach in St. Paul's Cathedral, but let him preach there dressed as an Arab...The point is that we should know where we are; and he would know where he is, which is in a foreign land."

This was written in 1920 by G.K. and, as Margaret Canovan remarks:<sup>103</sup>

"It is impossible to read this without being chilled by the recollection of the Nazis' Nuremberg Laws..." However, as she

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\*This was very much the theme of Chesterton's "Apotheosis of the Jew" article.



adds, quite correctly, "Chesterton was quite innocent of any such connection, and had no idea of making any such separate dress a mark of shame and an incitement to mob violence." His own 'final solution' to the Jewish question was separation in a homeland because, as he saw the situation, the special national character of the Jews had arisen through their landlessness over thousands of years. Again, in expressing these beliefs, he was drawn to using words which, in modern terms, can be interpreted as racist:<sup>104</sup>

"A...practical comparison would be one between the Jews and the Gipseys...Both races are in different ways landless, and therefore in different ways lawless. For the fundamental laws are land laws. In both cases a reasonable man will see reasons for unpopularity, without wishing to indulge in any taste for persecution. In both cases he will probably recognize the reality of a racial fault, while admitting that it may largely be a racial misfortune. That is to say, the drifting and detached condition may be largely the cause of Jewish usury or Gipsey pilfering; but it is not common sense to contradict the general experience of Gipsey pilfering or Jewish usury. But the Jewish problem differs from anything like the Gipsey problem in two highly practical respects. First, the Jews already exercise colossal cosmopolitan financial power. And, second, the modern societies they live in also grant them vital forms of national political power. Here the vagrant is already as rich as a miser, and the vagrant is actually made the mayor..."

Finally, on top of such overt statements, there is considerable evidence in G.K.'s literary work, particularly in his fiction, of cheap jokes about pawnbrokers noses and sinister figures meant to represent Jewish plutocrats.<sup>105</sup>

How, then, are we to judge G.K. with respect to his views on the Jewish question? Margaret Canovan employs a non-inductivist approach to the problem, suggesting that it is simply an example of a contemporary "fashion":<sup>106</sup>

"To radicals like Chesterton, the economic and political power of the Jews all over the Western world seemed as secure and unchallengeable as does that of America now, and the idea of a Final Solution seemed as incredible then as does the destruction of America now. The jokes about pork and noses, which we read as bullying taunts against the weak, were often meant by their writers as brave gestures defying the mighty."

She also highlights the difference between Fascist anti-humanitarianism and G.K.'s undoubted allegiance to the symbols of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.<sup>107</sup> But the problem with her overall thesis is that while it was certainly possible to indulge in anti-Semitic innuendo more freely and innocently in the inter-war period, it still required an extraordinary individual to develop the mixture of cultural and conspiratorial views evinced by G.K. Chesterton. Thus, to say, as she does, that: "By the standards of his time his anti-Semitism was very mild", tells us little, as this was the age of the world-wide acceptance of the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' and the rise of Nazi irrationalism.<sup>108</sup>

What is necessary is to look at G.K.'s anti-Semitism as an integral part of his overall ideology and not simply as a disreputable part tacked on because of a contemporary fashion to slander the Jews freely. Canovan's book lacks this dimension. She simply does not show how his anti-Semitism arose out of his radical Catholic liberalism in sufficient detail. Like A.K., G.K. was a man who forged his prejudices against the Jews in the days before it was realized just how far the pathological anti-Semites would be willing to go in their quest to irradiate Jewish interests from the modern nation-state. But this fact is not sufficient, either to excuse his prejudices, or to explain how he came to accept them in the first place.

Having made this clear, however, we can accept Canovan's point that G.K. was innocent of any likely association between his ideas and biological racism. Besides which he was most certainly not a 'racist' in this respect. For him "Nationality exists and

has nothing in the world to do with race."<sup>109</sup> He never committed himself to Fascism, although he visited Italy in the late nineteen twenties and wrote a book on the subject in which he complained that: "The intellectual criticism of Fascism is really this; that it appeals to the appetite for authority, without very clearly giving the authority for the appetite."<sup>110</sup>

In the case of Nazism, he was doubly protected against its 'attractions' by the fact of his long held conviction that the Prussians had caused the First World War, by their arrogant militarism. Having not fought in the war itself he did not experience the sense of shared betrayal felt by the troops of both sides and consequently had little shared feeling for the German people. Nazism appeared to him as a pure expression of Prussian self-aggrandisement and from the first he was hostile to Hitler's drive for power. Indeed, by September 1933, he was so concerned about the rumours coming from Germany about anti-Jewish pogroms and atrocities, that he gave a special interview with the Jewish Chronicle to put the record straight.<sup>111</sup>

"In our early days Hilaire Belloc and myself were accused of being uncompromising anti-Semites.

Today, although I still think that there is a Jewish problem, and that what I understand by the expression 'the Jewish Spirit' is a spirit foreign in Western countries, I am appalled by the Hitlerite atrocities in Germany...I am quite ready to believe now that Belloc and myself will die defending the last Jew in Europe. Thus does history play its ironical jokes upon us.

Hitlerism is not the real spirit of Germany...the Russian and Prussian spirit are a menace to Europe, and always have been...."

Thus, as with A.K., we must not judge G.K.'s anti-Semitic imagery and ideas out of historical context. Nor should we attempt to assess such ideas in isolation from their wider beliefs and prejudices, for their anti-Semitism was an integral part of a

wider set of attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, before attempting to finally assess the causes and consequences of A.K. Chesterton's Fascist anti-Semitism, it is necessary to undertake a survey of the remainder of his Fascist ideas. For a study of these ideas in isolation can never clear up the question of whether or not Chesterton really supported biological anti-Semitism and the physical annihilation of the Jews, since the ambiguities of language remain in these writings. Thus, it is important to try and evaluate whether or not Chesterton's overall Fascist ideology was congruent with Nazism or not.

### Part 3

#### Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary.

What follows is an attempt to set Chesterton's anti-Semitism within the wider framework of his overall Fascist Ideology. Already the thesis has shown that Chesterton could function in wider society without the need for a 'scapegoat' on which to project the fears generated by a failed personality. We have also seen that he had developed a fairly complex pre-Fascist ideology based on aesthetic idealism, 'war socialism' (born in the trenches) and rejection of liberal democracy. How did these values influence his Fascism, and how were they, in turn, altered and modified by Fascist ideas? It is already clear that Chesterton's initial contact with the B.U.F. saw him attracted by the idea of Mosley as the great anti-democrat, embodying the leadership qualities of Carlyle's Hero and the virtues and moral ideas of the Elizabethan aristocracy, (both of which were ideals already absorbed by Chesterton.) Such links will now be

traced through in the whole corpus of his Fascist writings. In the process it will be necessary not only to look at what Chesterton believed himself to be opposing, but also at what he believed he was fighting for as a Fascist.

One of the most important causes Chesterton believed himself to be fighting for was that of the "lost generation" of 1914-18. His propaganda is shot through with references to the importance of this dreadful experience in the making of Fascism. In the following piece he displays the mixture of emotions which had made his war-time experiences so influential a foundation of his Fascism:<sup>112</sup>

"Our comrades did indeed die for the betterment of mankind, a truth which can only be perceived by understanding that the fight was not of nation against nation, but of a new spiritual urge against a world order which by 1914 had turned leprous with disease.

The armies of the Great War were the beneficent destroyers destined to shake to the ground the foundations of that order, but the battle did not end with the war's end. In one most definite sense it then began.

If only we survivors had recognized that truth long years ago, what agonies of a spurious disillusionment would we have been spared! Never for an instant could we have returned to become lost amidst the tragic chaos of the aftermath, or allowed our egos to become cluttered up with all the impedimenta of a peace-time existence, which knew no peace.

We would have remained on the march - unencumbered, trim-living soldiers come to enshrine in Britain the values of the dead. Now, as Fascists: Once again we lay aside what is superfluous to us. We abandon the comforts which we found comfortless, the escape along which no escape was to be had. Once again we scorch out of our souls conflicting loyalties. Once again we are on the march, and struggle and danger make us free.

Sometimes it happens that we are still encumbered and do not march lightly enough. A pet vanity must be abandoned here, a creature comfort there, or it may be a piece of self-interest which remains to slow us down, or a distaste for discipline....."

Chesterton believed that, as with the war, he had come to serve a cause which transcended his own ego - genuinely worthy of his complete devotion. For him the Fascists were "soldiers of Britain's civic life."<sup>113</sup>

Mosley recognized this driving force at the heart of Chesterton's Fascism and wrote of him:<sup>114</sup>

"Chesterton is more than a brilliant and incisive writer. He is a living symbol of the lost generation which has found itself again. More than any writer of this time, he expresses in dynamic and passionate prose the resurgent soul of the war generation...Supremely characteristic of the Englishman of 1914, he could find no home but Fascism...Chesterton expresses their fierce disgust and their cold anger in the bitterness of a thousand betrayals. He recaptures also the rapturous spirit of 1914 in their undying march to greater heights and mightier service to the land they love."

Stripped of its obvious propagandistic excesses this does indeed capture Chesterton's continued commitment to the spirit of 1914-18.

On the other hand Chesterton rejected the claim that this meant that he was glorifying war:<sup>115</sup>

"The real difference between the democrat and the Fascist in this respect, is that the former hates war because it is a waste of life, whatever the quality of that life, while the latter hates war because it is a waste of life which could be enobled by precisely those sublime qualities which find their expression in war. Were life in the main incapable of providing for the existence of these virtues, were life fundamentally unheroic, then the democrat's attitude would be unchanged - the world which he fashioned for his habitation is essentially unheroic: whereas, in that unhappy event, the Fascist would be glad to relinquish every claim except the fierce hours of battle and a Warrior's grave...War sounds horrible, peace sounds beautiful. But the fact of war may be much less horrible than the fact of peace...The need for a moral equivalent of war has long been recognized by psychologists. That need is now to be supplied, only just in time to save our manhood and womanhood, by Fascism...That is what Mussolini meant when he declared, to the unspeakable disgust of the bourgeoisie, that it was better to live one day as a lion than a year as a sheep. There is a worse thing than physical disintegration, and that is death-in-life - the disintegration of the soul...."

As one would expect from this, Chesterton considered pacifism to be one of the chief enemies of Fascism. But his feelings were sometimes tempered by the realization that his own wife was an active pacifist. This is apparent in the following piece which, if read with this fact in mind, conjures up an ironic picture of him struggling to be fair to his wife, while at the same

time attempting to attack her creed;<sup>116</sup>

"But there are more genuine pacifists to be found, especially in a curious body calling itself the Peace Pledge Union. Although most of its members find it difficult to disguise their fashionable left-wing sympathies, most of them do make an attempt - however shadowy and unreal - to be fair. When I attended one of their meetings a few days ago, and was impelled to correct one or two among many blatant untruths about the Modern Movement, I was conscious of a blaze of fury in the eyes of many would-be peace-makers, not excluding those of the hitherto benign chairman.

These curious people spend their time at meetings and study circles, and in protesting against cadet-corps, military tournaments and the rest of it. They help thereby still further to undermine the already cracked and crumbling morale of the race, because nothing can be more certain than that a nation which refuses to defend even its native soil is marked down for the foulest of all destinies - the leprosy of decay.

Yet I am conscious of the hard work and devotion which many of these people lavish upon their cause. They are decent men and women most hideously betrayed into error. It is impossible for them to understand that the only way to secure real peace is to make peace a noble and splendid adventure, and that to help keep in existence a peace of infamy is to bring irreparable damage upon all except the parasites whose only real food is decay...."

Doris Chesterton had good cause to remember the meeting mentioned by her husband in this article, for it was she who had organized it. At that time (June 1937) they were living in Dorking and she was on the local committee of the Peace Pledge Union. On this occasion she had managed, after much effort, to arrange for Rose Macaulay, the famous unilateralist disarmer, to address the branch. Pleased with her coup she rather rashly informed her husband of the forthcoming event:<sup>117</sup>

"His view at the time - as ever - was that Britain's first duty was to be able to defend herself with her own 'strong right arm'. Pacifism he held to be decadent. He did not want to embarrass me, but it seemed essential to him to attend the meeting and put Rose, and all the rest of us, right. I was appalled, knowing he was capable of taking over the meeting I had convened."

To her immense relief he was prevented from attending the meeting by essential Fascist duties and the meeting went along

with predictable smoothness. Nemesis was, however, at hand after all:<sup>118</sup>

"Just as she was summing up Kenneth appeared—in full uniform as an officer in the Black Shirt movement, bearing down on us like the Wrath of God...He heckled Rose without ceremony and a ding-dong argument ensued, intense on Kenneth's part, good-humoured but impressive on Rose's. I have always been sorry that I was too embarrassed to listen, for what passed must have been well-worth recording...I need not have worried. The situation delighted Rose. After the meeting she asked one of the committee who the Fascist officer was who had burst in upon us at the eleventh hour. 'Mr Chesterton', she was told. She knew, of course, that I had convened the meeting. 'Not Mrs Chesterton's husband?' she exclaimed. 'Oh, how lovely!' Outside the hall she met us both amicably arm-in-arm. I introduced them. She smiled. 'I didn't quite follow all your arguments', she said. Kenneth was as ever when meeting someone socially his most charming self. The brief encounter ended warmly...."

Doris also recalled another ironic incident which arose out of their radically different political activities. In 1938 they left their flat in Dorking:<sup>119</sup>

"Kenneth had a tidy-minded secretary who arranged our so-different papers in the same cupboard. Appropriately he had labelled the right-hand side of the cupboard Action and the left-hand side "Peace News". After we left the flat the incoming tenants promptly removed both labels. As they told me when we met by chance in 1938, 'We didn't see why we should go to prison for both of you'.

It should be appreciated that Chesterton was not always so kind to his wife's creed, or to those, like her, who held to its tenets. At his most polemical he characterised the pacifist as "perhaps the vilest of all parasitical human growths", and promised that Fascism, in power, would "stamp out the entire plague of pacifism."<sup>\*120</sup>

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\* Chesterton's use here of such extreme language is significant in the context of our earlier discussion of his propensity to use phrases in his anti-Semitic writings which are deeply ambiguous in their meaning. For, if by calling the Jews "parasites" (which he certainly did) he was indicating a biological classification, and the consequent need for a programme of eradication, then we can only conclude that he also wished to classify his wife and her friends under the same terms and apply a similar remedy in their case!



But Chesterton's attack on pacifism was part of a much wider preoccupation with the nation's decline into "decadence", a view with deep roots in his aesthetic elitism and anti-liberal values. His fullest statement on the issue appeared in the Fascist Quarterly, the B.U.F.'s 'theoretical' journal, under the title of "The Problem of Decadence".<sup>121</sup>

In it he asserted that a 'natural law' exists which ensures that a sick society, suffering from entrenched "decadence", contains a collective neurosis which is paralleled by each individual's feeling of disorientation. He argues, therefore, that only a corporate effort can free each individual from their own personal problems, which are in any case simply a reflection of the wider state of society. The examples of decadence given by Chesterton range over almost every aspect of life he disliked - the concept of Progress; the 'cult of toleration'; 'the system of smash-and-grab capitalism'; mass literacy and its exploitation by the mass media; Tory Imperialism; the 'decay' of the arts and the theatre; the League of Nations; and parliamentary democracy. But it is the causes and solutions he offers which are most interesting in this article.

In a nation in thrall to decadence (and therefore in decline) no individual can opt out of the system, according to Chesterton:

"Insulation is pure chimera: decadence, an affliction of the spirit, is a collective disease, exactly as bubonic plague is a collective disease, and only by collective measures can it be fought...It is not that the bulk of the populace becomes contaminated in any physical sense, but simply - though no less dangerously - that it becomes acquiescent in the spiritual sense; it accepts the atmosphere and repeats the jargon. Thus it lends its voice to the cry of 'Liberty' without asking to what use their 'Liberty' is being put, and shouts for 'Tolerance without investigating the matters that may fairly be said to be intolerable....."

There now follows a fascinating psychological theory which, albeit in a simplistic manner and with the opposite political conclusions, anticipates Eric Fromm's Fear of Freedom thesis.<sup>122</sup> He begins by insisting that individuals are in retreat from modern life:

"as the world has become increasingly complex, and placed a large number of difficulties in the way of life, the individual both qua individual and qua member of organized society has sought to escape into a world of make-believe, known technically as the world of wish-fulfilment....as an inevitable consequence of each individual's attempts to evade reality there has been set up a neurosis which multiplied by millions has created a collective neurosis assailing entire nations. And when neurosis enters upon the human stage it comes as a messenger to announce that the life-forces of the spirit embattled against decadence have got themselves into a dangerous mess...The realities ferment none the less surely because on every hand they are driven underground, the result being intensified conflict between the dream-doped mind and the sharp actualities of life, a conflict that has led to wide-spread neurosis quivering on the verge of lunacy. The people in their agony cry louder than ever their familiar catch-words, and wriggle further into the poisonous womb of their make-believe...And in the midst of their confusion there came forth the Jew openly to claim his financial masterdom and the Bloomsbury intellectual to assume the spiritual leadership of mankind. The Lords of Decadence enter into their heritage and every vitiating influence is encouraged in order to break down what remains of a healthy, virile nationalism that alone could check and defeat the international rampage of usury and the international crowning of decay...."

Chesterton's solution is, of course, Fascism: because Fascism offers a corporate solution to what are collective problems. Fascism is, he insists, "a realist creed", since it "legislates for that profound need in man to work out his personal difficulties through direct contact with the social difficulties of his time." It offers a "group consciousness" which derives originally from "the time when man's life was almost entirely regulated by tribal custom". Buried within all this is a philosophy based upon a belief in a fundamental dialectical relationship which exists between the individual human and the social world - a belief crucial to Chesterton's Fascist commitment:

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"as collective neurosis is meaningless unless it be traced back to individual neurosis, so is individual neurosis meaningless unless it be related to collective neurosis. The man who discovers defects in himself but none in society is a long way from any cure, since both disease and cure are essentially collective. Similarly the man who discovers defects in society, but none in himself is no less far from remedy, since he has not yet learnt that his recognition of defects outside himself is possible only because the same, or analogous, defects exist within himself.... [Thus, as Fascists] We can be indignant with others only because we have the excuse to be indignant with ourselves: very often, indeed, our anger has no objectivity at all. And here, incidentally, is the answer of every revolutionary to the charge that he seeks social order while perhaps being unable to claim for his private life any marked suburban prettiness of design. In seeking to transform society man transforms himself and he is able to transform himself only by seeking to transform society. That I believe to be an enduring truth. Neither in health nor in disease can any man live unto himself alone...Man, being a social animal, is shaped to follow social ends and to strive always for a better adaptation to the social life about him, and when that life is depraved and insupportable, as when it is called a decadent age, he is able to come to grips with his personal problems by dealing with the problems of society in which his own, either directly or symbolically, are exteriorized..."

Here Chesterton must have had in mind his own failures to cope with the disillusionment consequent upon the betrayal of his war-time ideals - his alcoholism, his affair with the woman from Stratford, his many disappointments - and then his discovery of the comradeship of Fascism. His reference to the contrast between his private life and his public aspirations must also have had extra meaning to him, as the article was written in 1936, the year of his nervous breakdown and return to alcoholism through overwork. All this seems to have convinced Chesterton that only collective efforts could rescue the individual and the society from its decline into decadence.

It is also important to notice the role assigned to the Jew in this decline. He is not accused of biological destruction of the race, decadence is depicted as a spiritual, rather than physical phenomenon by Chesterton: and the Jew is seen as a cosmopolitan individual who, like the 'Bloomsbury Progressives',

capitalises upon the already decadent society.

As one would expect, given Chesterton's earlier preoccupations with drama and poetry, he viewed the changes in the arts as a classic symptom of this decline into decadence, and traces of his earlier writings can be found in the following piece of his Fascist writing:<sup>123</sup>

"When men are wrenched from the spiritual landmarks which guided their fathers, when they become confused by lack of any faith or certainty, it is perhaps to be expected that they should exalt their own confusion and call it 'emancipation' ... This explains the intellectual anarchy of our times. The uprooted individual today is free from the restraint of so much as a permanent idea. Should he seek artistic expression he can express only the chaos within him, which means that even the discipline of the art-form must be thrown aside. If he be painter, colours run riot on his canvas to display the colour-blindness of what he believes to be his subconscious mind, and orderly things are distorted beyond all recognition to mark his high disdain for order. If he be poet, the sense, fitness and beauty are swallowed up in the manic association of fantastic dissimilarities which find harmonious relationship nowhere... If he be musician, then the pleasure principle gives way to the principle of sheer pain, which seems somehow a good deal easier to contrive... In the light of Freudian technique the half-baked [artists] have learnt to dispense with the soul and its redundant responsibilities, in favour of something different called the 'ego', something to be petted and pampered, and excused because of its imperfect reactions to primary physical functions in infancy.

As equipment for life psycho-analysis suggests the biological equivalent of sending a man forth to do his love-making equipped with X-ray apparatus and this in turn suggests almost the identical fashion in which the characters of Aldous Huxley do indeed conduct the affairs of their hearts... Against all this we offer the National Socialist revolution, which among many things upholds the belief that man is more than the totality of his parts, that his personality is mysterious beyond his power to elucidate, and that unless wonder and aspiration dominate his attitude towards life it were better that he were dead.... The scientists led the world astray when they began to chase matter to its last frontiers... But our instincts are independent of the scientist - life being stupendous and science relatively so small.

Our instincts tell us that integrity is the incessant goal of our early life and that integrity can be served only in the light of a high spiritual concept.

That concept is denied by Capitalism and by Communism and by Anarchy... therein lies a denial of God and man."

Apart from revealing Chesterton's complete inability to understand the aims of modern art, the piece is interesting for its continued insistence that 'bad' art is a mirror of the corruption of the society which produced it. The conclusion is also significant in that it emphasises that life should be lived in the "light of a high spiritual concept" a belief which is also found in the work of G.K. Chesterton.\*

Also of great interest in this context is the following piece, written shortly after he had joined Mosley, and addressed to Britain's 'intellectuals':<sup>124</sup>

"..when taxed you talk psychoanalytical jargon about the evils of repression. You say nothing about the beatitudes of sublimation. Yet if you be persons of honour you must surely be amenable to the view that either sublimation and asceticism is the only royal road for you to tread.

You plead the cause of art: you point to your exemplar D.H. Lawrence. A great artist you say. But only in a decadent age do people argue that life is well served by an art which feeds on deformity. In an age of health art must surrender deformity to the psychological clinic...."

In another article, published shortly afterwards, he reinforced the point:<sup>125</sup>

"It is time that Wyndham Lewis was told to fight his way out of the spiritual delirium tremens before aspiring to make a mockery of men. It is time that T.S. Eliot was told that mankind has plenty of courage and a sense of direction, none at all for defeatism and disease...It is too late, unfortunately, for D.H. Lawrence to be told to resolve his own problem before sprawling it over the surface of the globe.

After all, integrity is no empty word: it exists, in art as well as in life. The man who achieves integrity does so only after he has taken his screeching ego across his knee and spanked it into a recognition of the unseemliness of its demands. He learns that an emotional mess is no foundation upon which to found his manhood, learns that what there is of nobility in life lies in disinterestedness and service... The trouble with most of the highbrow authors is that they have never seen life whole. All that they have seen is the chaos springing from the welter of conflicting thoughts and

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\*See the discussion of G.K.C.'s ideas above, pp270-271.

"emotions of the day, and because they lack the true inner vision they have failed to reduce their experiences to any kind of order and so merely fling back into the teeth of chaos a still more reckless chaos tortured by their dithering nerves and mental and spiritual disorders...their products are not art, but rather the denial and negation of art...these spiritual pigmies...."

In this piece Chesterton once again refers to "integrity" which he associates with denying the claims of the ego in the name of 'disinterestedness and service'. Again the individual is asked to sacrifice himself to the collective needs of society. This preoccupation with the decadence of modern artistic creation left Chesterton suspicious of even Noel Coward's work. Whereas formerly he had praised Coward as a "great" playwright, for his attacks on the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, he now insisted that Coward had to be judged in relation to the spirit of the times:<sup>126</sup>

"Noel Coward proves himself a giant in this age of dwarfs only to the extent that the popular dance band leader proves himself a giant. And in the world of modern art it is with such giants that the victory lies. The Press fawn upon them and the people gladly pay."

Only George Bernard Shaw remained, for Chesterton, a figure of significance. Accordingly, Chesterton accorded him a place of 'honour' in the future Fascist utopia (albeit a place that Shaw would have been most likely to refuse):<sup>127</sup>

"...the Bernard Shaw of the future will be neither suppressed, nor ignored, nor treated as a buffoon; he will be used, his immense faculty for social criticism meeting with speedy recognition and contributing not only to the benefit of posterity, but to the solution of the practical problems of his own day...But on the other hand, the great men will be charged with the responsibility to see that their powers are used for the advancement of the corporate life of the nation and not as explosives for blasting it to bits."

He also retained his belief that art, especially poetry and drama, could provide a vision of the truth. In a short story published in Action in 1936, entitled "Poet By Request",

he included the following thoughts:<sup>128</sup>

"Look me in the face and tell me whether you have ever heard it said that poetry is the language of heroes...Do you know that poetry is the voice of the Truth?...You ask for more poets. Let me tell you that you ask thereby for cleansing swords raised against your shuffling, futile world...they will scorch you with their fires when they come to claim this land in the name of the master-singers who have felt for England a love that flames white with scorn at the very thought of you.

Not out of the 'varsities', nor out of the Bloomsbury drawing-rooms are poets produced. They spring from the soil and from the history and from the agony of a great people... They are the custodians of the spirit of this land which has been great during many centuries..."

Nor could the truths of the great artists be squared with the requirements of liberal democracy:<sup>129</sup>

"The charge that Fascism brings against democracy is that it neglects and thereby tends to destroy, real values. Its mind is appeased by beautiful words, irrespective of the underlying realities. That is why the poets, and prophets and sages have always been confounded. Their words have been treasured but never the fierce yearning for action these words expressed.

Everywhere in the democratic world, for instance, one finds an insistence on the supreme value of life, derived from the great humanist philosophers and poets who certainly never intended that their message should be interpreted as indicating that life necessarily contains value independent of all human endeavour...."

Thus, to Chesterton, Fascism was sanctioned by the great artists in its drive to realize the 'god in man':<sup>130</sup>

"Fascism...is the spirit of the men of action; the conquerors, the law-givers. It is the spirit of superlatively great artists, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Velasquez. It is the spirit of the nations in the fire of their greatness, passionately following their rising star."

Mixed with all this was Chesterton's continuing predilection for linking art to specific cultural backgrounds. Although now cosmopolitan culture is viewed by him as a purely destructive influence upon national cultures:<sup>131</sup>

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"The most truly universal culture is also the most national culture, because it is to the nation that it owes its landscape and its soil, whereas cosmopolitan cultures are a synthetic thing (sic.) without aspiration and without roots - mere bastardisations that reduce all things to their lowest common denominator...Only through nationalism, indeed, can universalism come into being...."

No longer was Chesterton willing to praise Jacob Epstein for his healthy cosmopolitanism forged outside the national context as he did in his 1929 Torquay Times article: instead he chose to write a front-page denigration of Epstein in the Blackshirt, in which he indulged in anti-Semitic innuendo calculated to ridicule his art as a debased exercise improvised by an inferior alien ability.<sup>132</sup>

This extreme cultural nationalism became intertwined in Chesterton's Fascist thinking with what might be termed a neo-Spenglerian philosophy of history. Prior to his entry into Fascist politics there is no evidence that Chesterton had even heard of Spengler and his pre-Fascist writings show no signs of even an indirect influence. Only after he had adopted Fascism did his work take on a recognizably Spenglerian character.

It is easy to imagine Chesterton's receptivity to Spengler's ponderous brand of cultural and political pessimism, and equally clear why he (like so many Fascists) rejected Spengler's devastating conclusion that the decline of Western civilization was both inevitable and irreversible. // Oswald Spengler, an obscure Munich schoolmaster prior to the publication of his Untergang des Abendlandes in 1918 (published in English in 1926 as The Decline of the West), based his analysis upon a belief in large-scale laws of historical development. He interpreted history in terms of a series of "cultures", each of which mature into "civilizations".



Each culture has its own "soul" and symbolic form of expression, and each differs profoundly in spirit and dynamism from all the others. All, however, are thought to pass through the same basic socio-economic stages of development and decline - an early period of God-emperors, then a stage of monarcho-feudalism, followed by a phase of absolute monarchy and then oligarchy. This, in turn, gives rise to the penultimate "disintegrative" phase of liberal democracy, which prefaces the last popular-Imperial, or "Caesarian" interval, before a final collapse into barbarism and violent anarchy.

For Spengler it is the period of democracy which marks the transition of a culture into a civilization - a regressive step in his opinion. For this is the phase of the masses, in which the cultural values of the peasant, the priest and the Lord are submerged by the combined forces of industrial society - the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He insists that under this system classes no longer exist as before, their place having been taken by the 'masses' of an increasingly urbanized society. The Spenglerian symbol of this phase of democratic civilization is the terrifying "Megalopolis", the giant city, depicted as sucking into its "iron belly" the increasingly insignificant units of humanity, who swarm in from the hinterlands of the old aristocratic oligarchic culture. In the realm of politics, political parties are seen as losing their class significance, being reduced to mere rival gangs manoeuvring and jostling for control of money-power (the new driving force of mankind) occasionally appealing to the worst instincts of the city masses through the "democratic" franchise, to assist their totally self-interested leadership.

Thus, for Spengler:<sup>134</sup>

"Man does not speak to man; the Press and its associates, the electrical news service, keep the waking consciousness of the whole peoples and continents under a deafening drum-fire of catch-words, standpoints, scenes, feelings, day by day, year by year, so that every Ego becomes a mere function of a monstrous intellectual something..."

Within this exhausted civilization Spengler depicts the bourgeois intellectuals as victims of their own creation - the 'rational' world of the "Cosmopolis" which allows them the 'freedom' to contemplate anything and everything, even the decline and destruction of their own civilization, with complete acceptance. Against this amoral attitude of the intellectuals Spengler sets the "men of action", the physical men "of the blood", those who instinctively reject the loss of culture to a debased civilization and, in contrast to the decadent intellectuals, who alone have the power to attempt to master events, to control the uncontrollable.

Spengler devoted much time in all his works to attacking bourgeois intellectuals and liberal intellectualism in general. These "civilized" men are viewed as being cut off from the "eternal blood" of their cultural roots. Yet, although "blood" imagery, and talk of the "racial soul" runs through his work, Spengler was not a biological racist. Rather he developed a complex metaphysical and mystical conception of "racial death" and the "life of the blood", based upon a cultural perspective. Thus he wrote in his book The Hour of Decision (published in 1934):<sup>13</sup>

"But in speaking of race, it is not intended in the sense in which it is the fashion among anti-Semites in Europe and America to use it today: Darwinistically, materially. Race purity is a grotesque word in view of the fact that for centuries all stocks and species have been mixed, and that warlike - that is, healthy - generations with a future before them have from time immemorial always welcomed a stranger into the family if he had 'race', to whatever race he belonged. Those who talk too much about race no longer have it in them. What is needed is not a pure race, but a strong one, which has a nation within it."

For Spengler, civilized intellectuals, being cut off from the traditional values of their society, fail to recognize the call of the "blood" to encourage the symbolism of custom and religion, and even procreation. Civilized intelligence, at the peak of its rootlessness, can no longer find sufficient reason for the production of children. Hence, women are encouraged to forsake the family for an equal role with men in the wider civilized society. While, on the other hand, homosexuality, whose role in primitive societies Spengler accepts as linked to tribal needs, becomes the cult of blatant exhibitionism for the civilized intellectual. All this adds up to the relaxed mind contemplating its own destruction with total equanimity, with the "intelligent woman" and the "womanish man" as symptoms of this bankruptcy of democratic society.

Only Spengler's "men of blood", his "fact men" can confront the growing chaos. But, with weighty pessimism, he informs us that the history of all past civilizations teaches us that the authoritarian Caesarist alternative can only delay the inevitable collapse of the culture which they wish to restore along with the collapsing civilization which has superceded it. He lists several cultures of which the Apollinian (Greco-Roman, Classical); Magian (Arabe-Byzantine) and Faustian (European) are the most significant. Among the already dead, or dying culture worlds he lists those of India, of China and the Islamic world. All are thought to have suffered decline in spite of last-ditch authoritarianism designed to reverse the course of history.

In the case of the Greco-Roman collapse it was upon the ruins of this Southern European culture that the new Northern European (Faustian) culture-world arose. Within this faustian civilization Spengler sets the nations formed by colonialist activities from

Europe - North America, Latin America, Africa (South and Central), and Australia. Ultimately, he suggests, Faustian man is as doomed as his predecessors in other cultures to fail to reverse the engine of civilization and prevent the inevitable decline into barbarism and anarchy.

Spengler's ideas offered Chesterton the perfect vehicle for his own critique of democracy, cultural decline and decadence. It provided him with a historicist sanction for his rejection of city centred civilization and converse support for ruralism. Finally it gave him support for the moral superiority of the man of action, setting out against impossible odds to save his cultural heritage. Naturally, as we shall see, Chesterton could not accept Spengler's bleak pessimism with regard to the inevitability of the destructive force's triumph, nor was the perspective of a European wide culture nationalistic enough for his tastes; but he soon adapted the thesis to suit his own requirements.

Chesterton never openly acknowledged the importance of Spengler to his thinking during his Fascist period,\* yet there is no mistaking it in his work. The following passage is taken from Spengler's Decline of the West:<sup>136</sup>

"Primitive folk can loose themselves from the soil and wander, but the intellectual nomad never. Homesickness for the great city is keener than any other nostalgia. Home is for him any one of those giant cities, but even the nearest village is alien territory. He would sooner die on the pavement than go 'back' to the land...They have lost the country within themselves, and will never regain it..."

Now compare this with the following extract from Chesterton's Fascist writings. It reveals his old commitment to aesthetic idealism, cultural nationalism and anti-democratism, linked now

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\*In an interview with Spearhead, in 1969, Chesterton gave Spengler as an important influence on his thinking. Cf Spearhead, April 1969.

with his growing anti-Semitism, through the medium of Spenglerian historicist mysticism:<sup>137</sup>

"Art should not be a drug to lull our higher senses to sleep, but a trumpeter calling from the mountain-tops to man, bidding him awake to his destiny of struggle, defeat, victory and life.

Time was when we had an English theatre in our land... Before the festering brains of the Levant found profit in our credulity we could at least go to Hell in our own time-honoured way.

But to be fair to the Jews, the problem is not one of their own contriving any more than decaying cheese is the work of the cheese-mite. Each prosper because the conditions are favourable to their prosperity.

The problem begins when man ceases to be an individual and becomes a democrat - that is, when he forgets the soil. At that moment he forgets as well all heroic and tremendous things...when the pavement divorces man from the earth he must with sufficient frequency pass beyond the pavement's end or go bad.

That is the tremendous problem with which urban civilization is faced...Unless they know, mystically, that beneath the concrete lies the earth which has nourished their race for a thousand years and more, and that it is their own earth from which their blood is shed and renewed, then they are a lost people and easy prey for those who have lacked roots for many centuries.

Thus indeed are a nation and its culture debased. National culture, a living and growing thing, can absorb even poisons and use them for its growth, but once the earth is paved, once the landscape is blotted out from the range of the inner-eye, then growth is stopped and poisons animate the corpse into that dreadful new life which is called decay.

When parasites crawl in and out of art like wood-lice, then culture is decadent and the people brought face to face with doom."

The first thing to notice is the way in which the term "urban civilization" is used negatively in contrast to a healthy "national culture". Then there is the avowedly "mystical" conception of the nation's cultural heritage - the image of the "blood" of the people, which is "shed and renewed" in the native soil. This cultural "landscape", once visible to the "inner-eye", ceases to be safe when the "democrat" appears, divorced from the soil by the pavement of the great urban conurbations. All this is classically Spenglerian in tone, with the transition from culture to urban civilization marked by the appearance of democracy.

Where Chesterton does differ from Spengler is in his assessment of the Jews' role in the process. For, like so many Fascists, Chesterton could not accept Spengler's assertion that no culture-race could be expected to survive because of some form of superiority contained within it. Chesterton failed to apply fully the deterministic ideas of the master of racial despair, for he considered that the "races" were not only distinct, but could also be ranked in order of superiority for their cultural attainments, and that those most firmly rooted in age-long national traditions could, indeed, turn back the clock of "civilization" and regain their "racial-soul".

Thus, while Chesterton, like Spengler, viewed the Jews in cultural terms, he believed that their race-culture was not only distinct, but also inferior - because they had no national territory and were therefore rootless cosmopolitans, eternal city dwellers. Thus, he classified the Jews as a 'civilizational' force in the Spenglerian sense, while the British are depicted as a race-culture declining into decadence and therefore open to the civilizational influences of the Jews both in Britain and in the world at large.

Spengler's own anti-Semitism was based upon a belief in the total incompatibility of the European "Faustian", and Jewish "Magian", cultures. He adopted an ethnocentric oppositional posture towards the Jews which allowed for 'good' (assimilated) and 'bad' (unassimilated) Jews. They are not viewed as inferior but simply as different. Thus, when he spoke of the "appalling hatred" between the Jews and their host nations, he was suggesting that two mutually exclusive, but equally valid, cultures had been thrown artificially into dangerous proximity, causing unrest and

civil strife to occur. For him all races had passed through, or were passing through, a "cultural" stage, including the Jews, and from this he drew his theory that all cultures must decline into civilizations and be replaced by new, and different, cultures. This is how he came to accept the decline of the West as inevitable. He was a true determinist, and did not require an escape clause to indulge in preferential treatment of his own culture. As such he differed radically from most of his aspiring Fascist interpreters, including Chesterton.\*

Nor could Chesterton adopt the definition of "Faustian" culture, because he was a passionate nationalist who refused to accept that he shared a cultural background with Germans, Frenchmen, or Italians.

It is important to pause here and take a closer look at Chesterton's anti-Semitic sentiments as expressed in the distinctly Spenglerian piece quoted above. For in this piece, not only are the Jews under attack as a cultural entity, but also Chesterton is suggesting that they are not the cause of the decline, merely its beneficiaries:

"to be fair to the Jews, the problem is not one of their own contriving any more than decaying cheese is the work of the cheese-mite. Each prosper because the conditions are favourable to their prosperity."

It is the advent of liberal democracy and the destruction of

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\*The most depressing thing about Spengler's work is the positive relish he seems to hold for the "heroic" but futile struggle of the "Caesar" men, the "fact men", in their authoritarian and brutal struggle against the forces of civilizational decay. He may not have agreed with the Nazis' racial determinism, but he most certainly helped to legitimize the most brutal elements of their legalized terror.

links with national traditions which constitute threats to the 'racial soul'. The Jews are seen as simply seizing upon a pre-existing decline. Even the disgusting metaphors used by Chesterton - images of the Jews as "parasites". "wood lice", "cheese mite" - support this interpretation, as they are creatures which can only attack already weakened material. The inference is that decline has already set in without Jewish influence. This is foreign to biological racism which posits a racial degeneration, brought about by interbreeding of "higher" and "lower" racial stocks. Nor could Chesterton's suggestion that a healthy national culture "can absorb even poisons and use them for its growth" find any place in Hitler's biological racist cannon.

It is instructive to compare Chesterton's distinctly Spenglerian ethnocentric metahistory with Hitler's racist historicism. For Hitler historical development is dominated by three groups of people - the founders of culture, the bearers of culture, and the destroyers of culture. Of these he considered that only the Aryan could be considered as the representative of the first group. Some non-European peoples like the Japanese are considered to have been the bearers of culture, that is inheritors of some of the attributes of Aryan culture. Finally there are the destroyers of culture - the Jews. At first sight all this talk of "culture" seems to parallel Chesterton's preoccupations with the subject. But closer inspection reveals that Hitler holds a rigid biological definition of culture and views the course of historical development as one of degeneration through blood mixing.



To Hitler it was the Aryan conquest and subjugation of the two lower racial groups which led to racial decline, paralleled by economic, political, social and moral collapse. Therefore, for all the talk of "culture" in Hitler's supposed laws of historical development, the dynamic element, the central belief of the thesis, is that of race mixing and biological decline:<sup>138</sup>

"..it is no accident that the first cultures arose in the places where the Aryan, in his encounters with the lower peoples, subjugated them and bent them to his will. They then became the first technical instrument in the service of a developing culture... [But]...The Aryan gave up the purity of his blood and, therefore, lost his sojourn in the paradise he had made for himself. He became submerged in the racial mixture, and gradually, more and more, lost his cultural capacity, until at last, not only mentally, but also physically, he began to resemble the subjugated aborigines more than his own ancestors. For a time he could live on the existing cultural benefits, but then petrification set in and he fell prey to oblivion.

Thus cultures and empires collapsed to make place for new formulations.

Blood mixture and the resultant drop in the racial level is the sole cause of the dying out of old cultures; for men do not perish as a result of lost wars, but by the loss of that force of resistance which is contained only in pure blood.

All who are not of good race in this world are chaff.

And all occurrences in world history are only the expression of the races' instinct of self-preservation, in the good or bad sense." (Emphasis mine, D.L.B.)

"All great cultures of the past perished only because the the originally creative race died out from blood poisoning.

The ultimate cause of such a decline was their forgetting that all culture depends on men and not conversely; hence that to preserve a certain culture the man who creates it must be preserved. This preservation is bound up with the rigid law of necessity and the right to victory of the best and strongest in the world".

Hitler's central political ideas have been aptly summed up by

Herbert Luthy as:<sup>139</sup>

Over/.....

"...an insane world in which history, politics and the 'life struggle of the peoples' are pictured solely in terms of coupling, fornication, pollution of the blood, selective breeding, hybridisation, generation in the primeval slime which will improve or mar the race, violation, rape, and harassment of the women - world history as an orgy of rut, in which dissolute and devilish submen lie in wait for the golden haired female."

In short, Hitler's brutal mixture of Social Darwinism and crude biological racialism is distinctly different from Chesterton's Spenglerian ethnocentrism. For Chesterton the Jews have debased British "culture" with their cosmopolitan decadence and civilization; in Hitler's demonic historicism the same supposed phenomenon in Germany is merely the symptom of a deeper racial law by which the Jews plot to systematically poison the blood of the last Aryans.

Examples of Chesterton's Spenglerian perspective occur throughout his Fascist writings: 140

"In every age, and in every part of the globe, man has shown himself to be a tribal being, existing in more-or-less harmonious relationships with the other beings in his group. The tribe may also quarrel, but it admits no fundamental dissensions.

These dissensions appear only when the tribes merge into nations and the nations evolve complex forms of life denoted by the word "civilization". The rhythm of tribal life then tends to become submerged and shattering discords take its place."

While his views on the Fascist revolution included the suggestion that: 141

"...the hero as man of action has appeared again upon the earth, and in almost all countries of the earth, to rally the forces of life against the menacing powers of decadence and death...Then shall the communities of man have life in abundance, and the only aristocrats will be those who tend that life with the passionate devotion of their own."

Of course, the utopian optimism for the victory by the Caesar men of Fascism, is Chesterton's own. Indeed, it is important to note just how much of Chesterton's Fascism was a creed of vitalistic optimism, a joyous celebration of the ideas of sacrifice and struggle for life, which is seen as ending in

victory for the Fascist revolutionaries.

The following quotation reveals clearly this mixture of Spenglerian historicism, cultural anti-Semitism~~and~~ and utopianism, which is so characteristic of Chesterton's Fascist writing:<sup>142</sup>

"The most serious danger today is not the dumping of cheap goods and cheap human material, but the wholesale importation of emotional and mental slush...whereby national awareness is destroyed...If it were possible for us to become insulated, were it but for a year, I believe our people would steadily rediscover the lost soul of their race. One thing at least would result - the creation of a further refugee problem elsewhere, due to the inability of cosmopolitan values to exist in the sunlight of an awakened English consciousness... Much English badness would doubtless remain...Some there are, uprooted from the saving instincts of their soil, who even deny the existence of the racial soul. They are the natural dupes of cosmopolitanism, who have no roots themselves and therefore make rootlessness the chief of all virtues."

The article ends with an optimism entirely missing from Hitler's gloomy Manichean view of a thousand years of racial decline weighing down Aryan man:

"Twenty years ago the nation at war was in large part sound. It had behind it upward of a thousand years rooted in the English soil and tradition. It is still the most valiant race on earth, and the most lovable. We believe it will one day cut itself adrift from the neurotic trend of the modern world and proclaim once again in its way of life the supreme value of Englishness..."

Only after Chesterton had left Mosley did he write a defence of Spengler's views and then only half-explicitly. He was writing a review of the neo-Spenglerian writer John Katz for The New Pioneer in 1939. He was attracted to Katz's

suggestion that a "world neurosis" existed within the body of mankind, which was fostering conflicts between peoples and nations the causes of which remained subconscious impulses in participants. Katz's solution was to reveal to the peoples of the world the true causes of their neurosis by making them conscious of the historical process of which they were a part.\*

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\*This thesis resembles Chesterton's own beliefs as expressed in the piece on "decadence". See above, pp282-284.

But it is when Chesterton starts to criticise Katz's thesis that his commitment to Spenglerian values becomes clear:<sup>143</sup>

"This is finely said and the reader settles down in the belief that here may be a man big enough to give the Spenglerian argument its quietus. But it does not work out like that...Although the human situation is the sole civilizational constant, the varieties between one civilization and another cover pretty well the whole field of life. Not Chinese civilization alone, but every civilization, is unique, and the 'scientist' is not likely to get far when he collates what he calls the 'success' of China and the 'failure' of Rome - especially when historico-geographical differences, and consequent differences in tempo, are left out of account. China for long centuries was vegetative and little subject to culture-diffusion from without, whereas Rome rose and fell in the Mediterranean ferment.

But Mr. Katz treats them both as though they were charged with the same dynamic drives and tensions...."

This is undoubtedly written from a Spenglerian perspective.

Witness the following extract from The Decline of the West:<sup>144</sup>

"The categories of the Westerner are just as alien to Russian thought as those of the Chinaman or ancient Greek are to him... and for the modern Chinese or Arab, with their utterly different intellectual constitutions, 'philosophy from Bacon to Kant' has only a curiosity value...other Cultures have with equal certainty evolved out of them selves."

This survey of Chesterton's Fascist adherence to <sup>neo-Spenglerian</sup> cultural metahistory has, briefly, brought into focus several other related elements of his Fascist ideology. There is his association of "democracy" with the debasement of national culture into civilization; his extreme nationalism, which prevented him from accepting Spengler's definition of a European-wide culture base for British society; and his belief that only authoritarian leadership, by men of action, could halt the trend to decadence and decline.

Chesterton's anti-democratic sentiments have, as we have seen, deep roots in his pre-Fascist thinking. From his childhood in South Africa onwards he had been estranged from democratic

sentiments, and his brief flirtation with local democracy in Torquay had simply reinforced his disbelief in this method of government. Now, armed with Fascist anti-Semitism, with its detailed conspiracy accusation against the Jews, Chesterton was more than ever convinced that democracy was a dangerous form of political organization. For, behind democracy (and Communism) lay the sinister figure of the international Jew, operating through his control of world finance capitalism.\* To Chesterton, liberalism was the moral philosophy, finance capitalism the economic system, and democracy the political system most favourable to manipulation and exploitation by international Jewry. (Chesterton considered Communism to be merely a variation on this theme, hence his bizarre belief that British Communism was the artificial product of "Russian Export Capitalism".)<sup>145</sup>

Chesterton's hostility towards the democratic attack on war has already been dealt with above,\*\* but he also attacked democrats for their attitude towards the First World War:<sup>146</sup>

"Democracy spends much effort spurning totalitarianism as a peace-time principle. Yet when the hour of danger struck in 1914 its nose was tilted at a less supercilious angle. Incapable of a totalitarian peace, Democracy's fate it is to go down in history as the inventor of totalitarian war."

"Democratic governments declare war when powerful interests behind them conceive war to be to their advantage...The slaughter of millions through the rapacity of interest groups within the State would not be possible under Fascism."

On this latter point Chesterton harboured specific grievances

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\*This belief also had roots in his South African experiences. See the discussion below of the causes of Chesterton's receptivity to anti-Semitism, pp327-344.

\*\* See above, p279, End Note 115.

against wartime politicians:<sup>147</sup>

"Directors of firms which traded with the enemy were not introduced to a rope's end. Activities of profiteers were not curbed until they had brought more than ample fortune out of the nation's sacrifice. Employers were permitted to tyrannise over employees in the name of patriotism, the latter to retaliate with strikes in the name of social justice - both abominable crimes against the State."

Since the end of the war they had tolerated mass unemployment and despair:<sup>148</sup>

"In the democratic Snob-State the slums which stunt the lives of millions of people are not regarded as a pestilential disease assailing the entire community...Democracy is incapable of grasping the concepts of national integration and disintegration. Class-integration represents the height of its understanding. Therefore, when democrats display their habitual inefficiency in tinkering with the slum problem, they purr with a sense of their own benevolence - the kindness of one class towards a 'less fortunate' class.

Were they capable of adjusting their minds to realities they would discover that the slums are only one set of symptoms indicating the presence of the prevailing malady, many of the other symptoms being provided by their own ghastly, greasy mentality - the bourgeois condescension of their approach to the evil, and futility and sham of their remedies, for instance. That malady is called national disintegration - the physical and spiritual corruption of the whole community... The whole of Britain is a slum - spiritually a slum where it is not physically. And the physical aspect alone is ludicrously underestimated...rural slums alternating with urban excrescences to make a pleasant change...Remaking an entire environment for the health and greatness of the British nation is a heroic task; and no less heroic because it represents a fight against the death-bed of a mighty people. Fascism...is a nation's urge to health and strength and life, as opposed to democracy, which is a nation's paralysis, and surrender to regression and death."

Democracy could never work for Chesterton, it was too slow to effect changes, too permissive and tolerant of dissension, too ready to compromise between both "good" and "bad" interests, and, therefore, too easily influenced by self-interest and materialism. He had been searching for most of his life for the application of positive and disinterested action to solve the world's problems as he defined them. He saw democratic politics, of whatever shade of opinion, as putting the interests

of particular classes before those of the nation, a concept he was never able to sympathize with. Thus, while he was outraged by the conditions in which many working class people were forced to spend their lives, he could never accept that the solution lay in an exclusively working-class centred attitude to life.

He also continued to mistrust the apparatus and institutions of democratic rule:<sup>149</sup>

"Government of the people by the people for the people may or may not be a good thing. And up to the present the history of man provides no single result by which we may judge it, because such government has never existed.

The nearest approach is the old Greek city-state. Even here, however, oratory usually ousted sound sense; the only hope for the people being that the best orator would also prove himself the wisest leader.

The development of representative government in modern times has led to the perfection of the art of fooling the populace. This is because the demagogue has no longer to persuade the citizens how to decide; he has only to persuade them to allow him to decide on their behalf\*...and so politics becomes entirely a matter of make-believe and bluff...The politicians, recognizing the effervescence of public morals and the necessarily crude standards of public judgement, were to make themselves trustees of the public welfare...winning an election is a difficult business, entailing the use of a costly electoral machine. The organizations which operate these machines are not beholden to the candidates whom they help, but they are beholden to the man who gave them financial backing...The crack of the financial whip is therefore followed by the crack of the party whip."

This, inevitably, leads Chesterton back to the "Jew", since any system of government which is open to financial corruption must, in his view, favour Jewish interests. Democracy is seen by him as government of the people, through the democratic politicians, in the interests of high finance, or narrow class

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\*Shaw makes a similar point in Chesterton's favourite Shavian play - The Apple Cart. He makes it through the character Boanerges, the President of the Board of Trade. He is talking to the King about his chances of re-election to a trade union seat and tells the King that he is bound to be re-elected. The King suggests that it may not be easy, but Boanerges dismisses this thought, saying that the King doesn't know the workers: "I talk democracy to these men and women. I tell them that they have the vote, and that theirs is the kingdom and the power and the glory. I say to them 'You are supreme, exercise your power.' They say 'That's right: tell us what to do;' and I tell them.. 'Exercise your vote intelligently by voting for me.' And they do. That's democracy..."

chauvinism: 150

"Governments under democracy...are at the dual mercy of financial or class interests on the one hand, and of an electorate fed by falsehoods from Press and Party on the other. Leadership under such conditions becomes impossible; it must turn coward and opportunist even to endure...Should the more selfish have the liberty to plunder the unselfish? Should the more powerful class have the liberty to exploit the less powerful? Democracy cannot answer these questions. It is why democratic 'freedom' is championed by such sinister people."

When in less rational a mood, as in the next piece written on Armistice Day 1936, and spurred on by his disgust at the proposal to ban the wearing of the Blackshirt uniform, he produced some of his most debased polemics against democracy and its supporters, Jewish and non-Jewish. The article is addressed to the memory of the "Unknown Warrior" of the First World War: <sup>151</sup>

"The Ape-Lords of Democracy...They know as we know that your true memorial is the slum-lands of England, of Scotland, of Wales, the broken industries, the broken factories, the still unbroken men and women of our race who cling to a vanishing life with dignity equal only to your own in facing death. And that is the bitter truth...a nation which has lost its sap and become lice-ridden with maggots of Financial Democracy in the last obscene depravities of life...Patience, old pal! Men and movements are not made by uniforms."

Against this Chesterton offered Fascist authoritarian leadership, with its unambiguous will to action: <sup>152</sup>

"Merely to be alive may satisfy a democrat exulting in his own ego, but to the men and women of the modern movement - as to generous, aspiring souls of all ages - life possesses a value only in so far as its opportunities are used to create value."

It is already clear from the discussion above of Chesterton's reasons for joining the B.U.F. that he did so, in part at least, because he was inspired by the belief that Mosley was a true heroic leader, worthy of total sacrifice.\* Reference was also made to the fact that, although he did not mention him in his

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\*See above, pp228-229.



pre-Fascist writings, he was already under the influence of Carlyle's doctrines on heroes and hero worship. After joining Mosley he was much less reticent in this respect:<sup>153</sup>

"Leadership is instinct in nature...The Modern Movement...has discovered the validity of the truth thundered forth by one of the greatest of its prophets, grand, rugged old Thomas Carlyle, when he exclaimed: 'Find in any country the ablest man that exists there; raise him up to the supreme place and loyally reverence him; you have the perfect government for that country; no ballot box, parliamentary eloquence, voting, constitution building, or other machinery whatever can improve a wit.'

To the generation that was settling down to inherit the many doubtful legacies of the French Revolution, Carlyle's utterances appeared both polemical and reactionary. Yet a hundred years later, after passing through the shadow of the Valley of Death, the nations find the solutions to their problems in this inspired truth...Carlyle was right because the relationship established between the ablest man and the community is both organic and organically sound, and a good sound organism can no more offer violence to itself than a man can walk forward with his left foot and backwards with his right."

The Fascist leadership principle also appealed to Chesterton because it offered the chance of "disinterested" political calculation of the interests of the nation:<sup>154</sup>

"Fascism will allow the greatest possible democratic control consistent with good order and effective government. Fascism says that since there is dictatorship behind all government that dictatorship shall consist of the united will of the nation who have no private or class axe to grind, or who are pledged to the commitment that the grinding of their private axes shall be subservient to the good of the State.

Having by constitutional means achieved power, this body of fundamentally disinterested opinion hands it over to its trusted leader. The goal is known to all. The leader is pledged to lead towards that goal, his followers are pledged to follow. Authority and dignity are thus restored to public life."

It is clear from this that Chesterton saw principled leadership as an essential element lacking in the democratic system of government; indeed, he believed that "Fascism stands or falls by the leadership principle."<sup>155</sup>

His constant references to placing nation before class brings

into perspective his absolute belief in the nation-state as the repository of all meaningful historical forces, and the added conviction that Great Britain and her Empire provided the finest example of this historical "law" in action. Anyone looking at the whole range of Chesterton's Fascist writings will be struck by what Robert Skidelsky has called his "passionate, abstract patriotism".<sup>156</sup> It is already clear that from his childhood Chesterton had carried with him the seeds of this adult love of Britain and the British Empire. Brightlands and his period in the British Army, followed by his pro-Smuts activities in 1922, were all experiences which reinforced his nationalist beliefs. His aesthetic idealism had also contributed to this trend in his thinking. But the addition of Fascist idealism to this already heady brew, transformed his patriotism into a mystical, even transcendental, form of belief.

On the one hand his beliefs remained similar to those he held prior to his adoption of the Fascist cause, with the emphasis on service in the higher cause of the nation:<sup>157</sup>

"A heroic lady\* once declared that patriotism is *not enough*. It is true that the old patriotism was not enough, because it was too much concerned with the verb to be. Irrespective of what a man did, merely to be British filled the whole of his pride. His faith in his country and its institutions was as magnificent as it was childish...The collective will of a nation is a tremendous force, and once it is mobilized and trained upon the gigantic problems of the present day a new patriotism must emerge - the patriotism of active service to the general weal which alone has the strength to meet and overcome the problems which threaten the whole world."

He also believed that Fascism was a creed "wherein patriotism is passionately identified with the social conscience and directed

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\*Nurse Edith Cavell: the English nurse who was executed by the Germans in World War 1 for helping Allied prisoners to escape.

towards social objectives of a splendour surpassing anything known before in history."<sup>158</sup>

On the other hand, when mixed with Spenglerian historicism, his extreme nationalism bequeathed to him a utopian belief that Fascism could not fail to triumph in Britain as it was a pure outgrowth of British nationalism and therefore in complete harmony with the instincts of the British people:<sup>159</sup>

"There are two approaches to National Socialism - the path of feeling and the path of thought. Although the two interpenetrate at most points, the distinction is nevertheless valid.

The first approach is by far the most vital, in that instinct is swifter than logic, and the emotional comprehension of a truth immeasurably more compulsive than the most effective mental process.

He who, without bitterness, thinks his way towards a recognition of social injustice, or deduces a need for national revival without horror at the thought of national collapse, may have great services to give the National Socialist revolution, but he can never make that revolution... Men and women throughout the ages have been burningly aware of the shape of the native landscape, of the savour of their native soil, of the traditions grown, sprung from collective effort and from danger shared. When this sense of kinship and nationhood decays, the stock decays at the same time, and at only a slightly slower rate... The fact of nationhood is to be neglected only at a nation's peril, and all the verities of the human spirit bound up in that fact can be set aside only in the interests of Bedlam, represented in these times by international finance.

In other words, Socialism, in any real sense, can be created only in the passionate fires of patriotism.

Those who plod their way to this truth from one direction or another may have gifts to offer at the end of the journey, but if it were left to them the truth itself would be but fatuously served.

National socialism will be created in Britain because of the instinct of British blood. It may have the finest economic policy and the sanest political structure to commend it, but these things are futile unless there be passion in the drive to serve them - a passionate love of country, a passionate loathing of the country's betrayal, and a passionate faith in one's countrymen to act with high nobility when they are shaken from their sleep."\*

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\*This cry from Chesterton's soul could well have had an extra significance when he wrote it. For it was written late in October 1937, at the time when Chesterton had become disenchanted with Mosley's leadership and the policies of the Party's leading administrators.

The crucial phrase is, of course, that which suggests that Fascism will succeed because it is in tune with "the instinct of British blood." This is a mixture of Spenglerian blood mysticism with Chesterton's own, long-held, convictions that the core of British nationhood lay in its long history of cultural attainments and traditions. For him it is not enough, therefore, simply to recognize that Fascism has the "finest economic policy and the sanest political structure to commend it"; the true test of Fascist understanding lies in recognizing the mystical ties of nationhood, without which there can be no proper commitment to its practical realization. (This is a distinction which is crucial to the understanding of Chesterton's Fascist creed and it will be raised again in the concluding section of this chapter.)

Chesterton's absolute commitment to the national collectivity fitted in well with corporatist element of Fascist ideology. He had a clear vision of the corporate social, political, economic and moral consensus which would make up the Fascist 'good society'. It is already clear from the discussion above of his attacks on "decadence", that Chesterton believed that only by working together could men solve the problems confronting them.\* This was another element of his Fascism which can be traced back to his wartime experiences:<sup>160</sup>

Over/.....

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(Continued) His suggestion that instinct provides a better path to Fascist commitment than logic may be a reference to the difference between his own approach and that of Mosley. While the reference to those who "plod their way to this truth" and therefore "fatuously" serve the cause, could be a side swipe at Francis Hawkins and the other administrators. Of course, there is no way of substantiating such conjecture.

\* See above, pp283-284.

"The spirit of the team - the corporate spirit - transcends the spirit of the individual. Though it be the integration of separate personalities, yet in its synthesis it is revealed as possessing its own personality, charged with immense powers of animation over those who contribute to ~~its~~ strength.

Self-fulfilment through self-forgetfulness is the supreme reward which the team spirit offers. Private Tommy Atkins at zero hour, preoccupied with the concerns of Private Tommy Atkins is one thing - in morale and action, a frightened rabbit. Private Tommy Atkins, at zero hour, concerned with the honour of the British Army, is another thing - in the pride of his manhood, contributing to the transcendent spirit of his team he finds no epic attainment beyond his reach."

There is also a hint here of his public school background. The idea of the 'team-spirit' is a classic public school concept (although with a high proportion of the officer class in the First World War drawn from the public schools he would, no doubt, have picked up the concept in the trenches even if he had not experienced its meaning before.)

Chesterton tended to adopt the B.U.F party line on the overall nature of the corporate state. The idea was that once in power a Fascist government would implement an autarchic economic regime - building up the protected home market and drawing raw materials exclusively from the Empire. In pursuit of this end all dissenting sectional interests such as Capital and Labour organizations would be smashed and rebuilt on corporatist lines - that is integrated into the structure of the Fascist state. Finally the geo-political franchise was to be replaced by the occupational franchise which restricts the right of the citizen to voting on issues which directly affect his or her occupation, or involve the use of occupational expertise.

The whole idea was to free the economy and society from the external interests of the international market and the internal conflicts of class forces. Ultimately it was supposed to produce a government of technicians solving purely technical problems; then prosperity would grow rapidly and national culture would

once again flourish in an atmosphere of world peace and harmony negotiated between the authoritarian leaders of the technician nations. The whole scheme was basically Mosley's idea and, on the whole, Chesterton followed this blueprint faithfully.

The most interesting aspect of Chesterton's support for this corporate system lies in his views as to why human nature was designed to fit the corporate way of life:<sup>161</sup>

"In the theoretical limitation of the individual's power Fascism in practice extends it illimitably by rescuing it from an impossibly large milieu and concentrating it upon a smaller field...the field of his own special study. He is allowed at long last the corporate activity which his soul's health demands, by the simple expedient of being able to work on the task of bringing order and decency to his own occupation thereby functioning normally and realistically as a social being in a world where idealism and realism no longer spell antithesis."

"We shall require of every citizen that his methods coincide with national aims...The mystical truth of the paradox that in order to have life a man must first lose it is destined to play a very large and practical part in the Fascist ordering of affairs. That he may enjoy liberty the citizen of the future must lose it to the State...Human beings refusing to submit to a communal purpose higher than their own selfish purpose produce nothing beyond egoism, treachery and greed."

He viewed himself and his fellow Fascists as pioneers of this communal life, charged with setting the highest example possible to the, as yet, unconvinced general populace. The good Fascist was the prototype of the good citizen of the future, but he or she had to maintain this stance in the corrupted environment of a liberal democratic Britain. The highest virtues of courage, service and self-sacrifice, are therefore demanded of the 'good Fascist' by Chesterton:<sup>162</sup>

Over/.....

"...the good Fascist...is not fearful of his prestige, and therefore resentful of snubs, real or imaginary. He does not nurse his 'standing' or even allow it to outweigh his concern for the welfare of the Movement. He is not fearful lest the other fellow should get ahead of him, and at all times does he spurn to allow his ego to be exalted above the Fascist cause. He is not fearful lest recognition should be withheld from his efforts. He does not, after every job of work, assume the mental attitude of waiting for reward and when applause does not come he scorns to be discouraged or 'hurt'. These are pestiferous influences...and the Fascist finds no difficulty in crushing them out of his life."

"The Blackshirt Movement depends for its efficiency and drive upon men and women... willing to stand alone, impervious both to blackmail and to bribery, implacably determined to make no peace with the advocates of the bad old world, utterly refusing to merge or to be merged - men and women unique in the political life of the country by virtue of the fact that they cannot be 'bought'.

One of the basest tenets of materialist philosophy is the aphorism that every man has his price. Blackshirts repudiate this slander on the human spirit, and in accordance with the verities of 1914-18 affirm that the price of a good man is only to be paid in the currency of death.

'Faithful unto death.'

...to be prepared to set the value of an ideal above the value of life - that is to invite incredulous sniggers from the denizens of our democratic, money-mad world."

Another aspect of Chesterton's belief in the efficacy of the corporate state which deserves closer attention is that of its economic sanction. He made very few references to the economic justification of Fascism in his writings, as he had little understanding of this side of the creed,\* and when he did refer to it he stuck to the broad outlines of the subject, leaving abler Fascist economists to deal with the more complex issues it raised. The following are typical examples of his generalized comments: 163

"Apart from securing an Authoritarian Government, secure against the caprice of powerful sectional interests which make cowards of all governments, the chief objective of the Corporate State will be the abolition of the absurd and disgraceful anomaly, 'Over Production and Under Consumption.' "

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\*The fact that he had little real understanding of how economic systems operated may well be crucial in explaining why he was so susceptible to the simplistic appeal of the conspiracy theory.

"Fascism differs from Socialism chiefly in this - that in the Corporate State you [industrialists] will be left in possession of your businesses.

You would deceive yourselves if you were to assume that this privilege is granted you because of your record as a class... Had your patriotism been anything more than your own egos you would have shared your rising prosperity during the nineteenth century with your countrymen... You might with advantage spare a glance at that other evidence of your handiwork - the slums... learn how to reconcile business with the precepts of patriotism and religion... Laissez Faire in the future will lead either to dispossession or jail... It will be your task to produce your commodities as cheaply as possible, consistent with the high wages that you will be required to pay in order that the largest possible demand will be created and supplied."

Of greater interest, however, are his pronouncements on the moral principles which he believed to be sanctioning Fascist corporate economics. His basic argument seems to be that this system was a welcome return to the 'Moral Economy' of the medieval state, formerly ruled by the twin powers of the Catholic Church and nobility. Chesterton only produced one major article on the subject for the Fascist press and he began it by asserting that the combination of guilds and the paternalistic ethic of Church and State had secured for Medieval people "an effective check to economic rampage."<sup>164</sup> Admitting that this system rested on the unquestioned principle of a religious spirit which taught both ruler and ruled that the economic interests of the individual should be sacrificed to the wider interests of social well-being, Chesterton insists that Fascism will create a secular equivalent to this "proof of the Christian ethos that in order to have a life a man must lose it; in other words, that to have freedom a man must first surrender it to the commonweal." (The implication is that Fascist corporatism is in the spirit of true Christian tradition.)



Chesterton goes on to suggest that the sense of human dignity of the rulers of Medieval Church and State would have been outraged at the capitalist practice of treating labour as a commodity to be bought and sold in the cheapest market; while they "did not hesitate to inflict upon grafters and profiteers exemplary punishment." Chesterton gives his unqualified approval of what he terms this "benevolent dictatorship".

On the question of what has subsequently intervened to undermine this early stirring of the Fascist spirit of "benevolent" authoritarianism, replacing it with the hated creed of economic liberalism, Chesterton has few doubts:

"This system of economic discipline and order broke down, not because it was ethically, but because it was economically unadjusted to the problems of a changing world. Had it survived, human life today would be very different from what it is. There would be less innovation, less wealth, less comfort, less speed, less population, less turmoil. In place of these things there would almost certainly be a civilization based upon spiritual values as distinct from commercial values, since it is inconceivable that the dignity and self respect of Western man would not proudly reflect the benefits of five hundred years' training in the austerities of social discipline.

He admits, however, that it would have been unreasonable for men to have cast aside all the benefits of liberalism and industrialism, especially the immense power to realize improvements in material conditions for the masses, through the favourable mental climate it created for scientific discovery and technological innovation. In his view the tragedy comes with the throwing out of the ethical "baby" with the "bath water" of the stagnant Medieval economy:

"The divorce of economics from ethics could have been avoided had the Middle Ages possessed the insight to admit the principle of enterprise in the development of material riches and at the same time to insist upon the beneficent discipline of distribution and using of wealth obtained for the common good."

Continued/.....

"There is no deep division of mankind between the 'interested' and 'disinterested'...Unfortunately the men of the Middle Ages lacked this insight. The ecclesiastical authorities, fearing the advance of the secular spirit...were content to conserve, and suffered the necessary fate of conservatism in a dynamic universe which ordains movement - backward as well as forward - their own institutions began to decay. The ideal of wealth which they had refused to others became their own pursuit. Long before the end of the fifteenth century their authority was undermined by their own corruption. Moreover, the mediaeval system had held together on account of a corpus of religious beliefs sufficiently influential to secure; not alone economic regimentation in accordance with ethics, but no less drastic regimentation of the private lives of people.

It was not unnatural that in the course of time a revolt should have occurred against a discipline imposed by men who refused that discipline on their own account, and the main support for the Liberal emergence unquestionably came from those who wished for greater personal freedom, but had no private interest in the achievement of economic freedom. The two issues were confounded, and they have been confounded ever since; the idea of personal liberty being used as a cloak for the realist pirate whose one concern is to secure economic freedom with which to exploit and tyrannise over the rest of the community."

As to where Chesterton drew his ideas from in this respect, to some extent it reflects that strand of B.U.F. ideology represented by the work of W.E.D. Allen.\* To some extent the argument also resembles the 'Distributionist' medievalism of G.K. Chesterton, with its support for the Catholic church and guild system.<sup>165</sup>

But there can be little doubt as to the main source of these ideas - the Jewish, Marxist, academic, Professor Harold J. Laski. And the work of Laski's which had exercised such a strong influence over Chesterton was his The Rise of European Liberalism.<sup>166</sup>

Chesterton reviewed the work for both Action and Fascist Quarterly shortly after its publication in May 1936. The first review was headed "Specially Reviewed by A.K. Chesterton" and given that Chesterton was not a regular book reviewer for Action, it seems reasonable to suggest that he had asked the Editor for

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\*See above, p229.

the right to review the work.

In this first review Chesterton praised Laski for his "disinterestedness", because of his "merciless-exposure of the Liberal-bourgeois spirit."<sup>167</sup> In the second review he suggests that the work will prove enlightening for Fascists "mainly on account of its unconscious revelation of the conflict between the Fascist and Liberal motifs during the last five hundred years." This is followed by three pages of quotations from the book, of which the following section is an example:<sup>168</sup>

"The criteria of legitimate activity [in the Middle Ages] were not, so to say, derived from the pursuit of gain merely, taken as an end in itself, but were determined by moral rules to which economic principles were subordinate. The medieval producer...attained his individual end through an activity which, at every stage, bound him to rules of conduct which assumed the achievement of wealth to be justified only within a framework of ethical principle. He was entitled to sufficiency; but he must attain sufficiency by the use of means deemed morally adequate. He must not make value merely a function of demand. He must not pay only such wages as the labourer can exact. Hours of labour, quality of material, method of sale, the character of profit, all of these...are subject to a body of rules worked out, at their base, in terms of certain moral principles the observance of which is deemed to be essential to his heavenly salvation...Wealth was regarded as a fund of social significance and not of individual possession. The wealthy man did not enjoy it for himself or for its own sake; he was a steward on behalf of the community. He was therefore limited both in what he might acquire and in the means by which he might acquire it. The whole social morality of the Middle Ages is built upon this doctrine. It is enforced both by the rules of the Church and by civil law."

Chesterton commended such extracts as showing "early stirrings of the Fascist spirit", and there can be little doubt that it was from such passages that he took many of the ideas expressed in his own article on the subject. Not only do his own ideas exactly follow Laski's analysis, but the article appeared only two months after the second review of Laski's book. The fact that Chesterton borrowed so directly from these ideas is an indication that Chesterton had few ideas of his own on the

subject of Fascist economics. It is also indicative of his preoccupations with the mystical and moral bases of Fascism, that he should reach out and so wholeheartedly embrace the idea of the "moral economy", and it also fitted in with his conception of the need to sacrifice individual desires to the paramount needs of the nation.

Because of what he considered to be their profound disregard for the needs of the nation, Chesterton held the three main political parties in profound contempt. His assessment of British Conservatives was that they were a bunch of self-interested monopolists and reactionaries, devoted to preserving the status quo at all costs:<sup>169</sup>

"Whether the fault lies with the public school system, or with the corrupting influences of comfort I do not know, but this much is clear - that for utter insensibility, expressing itself as sheer political idiocy, one must go and listen to Conservatives chattering together, or answering questions put to them by their opponents.

'What exactly do you wish to conserve?' I asked a group of these people not long ago. There was a long pause before one of them spluttered the reply: 'Why, the country of course.' 'What against? Coast erosion?' This second question was received with a silence heavy with contempt.

They dared not answer. Had they done so they would have had to confess that what they wished to conserve were caste and class, and all the arrogance and privilege of wealth.

Though the larger part of the country be given up to slumdom and the desolation of a bankrupt agriculture, though land speculators and jerry builders have conspired to give our landscape the appearance of a leprous disease, the social lights of Conservatism are not greatly perturbed so long as trout swim in their rivers, and partridge breed on their estates, and foxes present themselves for the sniffing of their hounds...Poor, unhappy, decayed remnants of a once virile aristocracy, there is not one aristocratic virtue that they have been able to retain: like an abandoned harlot they have surrendered to the Lords of Cash...Around these custodians of 'High Society', stretching away on every side, exists the great mass of the bourgeoisie, all entertaining some hope, no matter how faint, that one day they will also make their social 'arrival'...You would not expect to find these aspirants endangering their social souls by voting against the existing social order, and your expectations are not belied: they are Tory to a man."

This is a clear indication of Chesterton's complete detestation of Tory politics. His view that they had betrayed their old aristocratic roots is interesting as it echoes W.E.D. Allen's views on the subject.<sup>170</sup>

The Liberal Party was of little interest to Chesterton as it was quite apparent that it had "dwindled almost to nothingness" by the nineteen thirties. However, liberalism was quite another matter. For Chesterton bourgeois society reflected the triumph of the liberal idea, while at the international level the world was, in his opinion, ruled by "the new plutocratic order of a triumphant commercial civilization".<sup>171</sup> But, with the collapse of the Liberal Party, Toryism had assumed the party political mantle of economic liberalism and was now Chesterton's chief target in this respect. It was now the Party of the "great vested interests" of Capitalism.

Part of the Liberal legacy had also, he thought, gone to the Labour Party - social liberalism, with its reformist gradualism, and Laissez Faire inclined trade unionism. Chesterton blamed the reformist betrayal of their working class support by Labour politicians upon this Liberal legacy:<sup>172</sup>

"The Labour Movement in Britain first sought political expression beneath the radical wing of the Liberal Party. Thereafter it emerged as an independent unit to champion the masses against the Money-Power, which uses both Liberalism and Conservatism for its own purpose.

As time went on Labour summoned up sufficient courage to avow its Socialist objective, but wrapped its intentions beneath the sugar-coating known as 'gradualism'. Thus did it remain glutinously faithful to the spirit of its Liberal inheritance - the spirit which inspires a political party to be all things to all men."

Continued/.....

" 'We shall build the Socialist State,' declared the Labour spokesmen amidst the cheers of their followers, and then accompanied the declaration with the hurried whisper to Capitalism, 'but not this week.'...Twice hoisted into office by the hard work and hardly-won savings of the poor, the Labour leaders have shown their complete 'respectability' by a meticulous regard for Capitalist feelings - a regard which has led them to prepare and enact legislation cutting harshly across the interests of their own followers without in any way advancing their ultimate welfare...Of course it has an answer...'We have not yet had a clear majority.'

That clear majority - what noble magic it is destined to work when the appointed time comes? By virtue of its potent alchemy the mule is to be transformed into a war-horse and the self-seeking political swindler into a Sir Galahad with eyes set nowhere except upon the Grail."

He was especially scornful of the undue haste with which Labour Party and trade union leaders had allowed themselves to become absorbed into the Parliamentary system of patronage:<sup>173</sup>

"There was, for instance, the General Strike, from which misfortune the Trade Union leadership arose strong in the knowledge that its destiny lay in the direction of making itself an integral part of the Capitalist system. Men who accept Knighthoods as a reward for keeping the industrial atmosphere sweet are not the type to unfurl any revolutionary banners while the going remains good for them."

Writing of the leading Labour Party figures Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden and J.H. Thomas, who had split from the Party in order to play leading roles in the National Government, Chesterton raged that:<sup>174</sup>

"They were not bought for cash in the way of a direct bribe, but they were no less certainly bought by the glittering prizes of the beau monde to which they had raised themselves upon the patient shoulders of the poor - the prizes of power and prestige and flattery; the opportunity to live in beautiful houses, to wear the best clothes, and to consort with Dutchesses.

How can it be said that Snowden was not influenced by his surroundings when he earned the plaudits of the City as an orthodox budgeteer, and thereafter cast derision on the whole of his life's struggle for the working class by taking his place in the Lords."

All these corrupt politicians were the result of an effete and decadent social, economic, political and moral system in

Chesterton's view:<sup>175</sup>

"Here, indeed, is the worst peril of all - the fact that the world-as-it-is has been tacitly accepted as too stark for modern man, who has accordingly invented a world of his own - the world of suburbia inhabited by a strange race known as the bourgeoisie. In bourgeois society facts give way before appearances. It is a good thing to possess a motor-car; in suburbia it is an even better thing to be known to possess a motor-car. It is a bad thing to be poor, but an even worse thing to be known to be poor. It is an unfortunate thing to commit a sin, but a catastrophic thing for the sin to be found out. The cry is not 'How will this damage my innate pride of being?' but 'What will my neighbours say?' The greater part of human energy is thus devoted to the sedulous keeping up of appearances, and life becomes little more than a continuous battle for prestige based upon entirely surface values. It is small wonder, therefore, that such a society offers itself for exploitation at the hands of those who are realists at any rate in the money sense and by those others, the political servants of the money jugglers, who master the art of bluffing the bourgeoisie. At one end of the scale the inhabitants of suburbia admire money because they possess money and base their 'appearances' upon money and therefore proudly rank themselves among the individualists: at the other end, the inhabitants also admire money, but do not possess money and see no hope of acquiring money as individuals, on which account they rank themselves among the collectivists...At both ends of the scale the people are betrayed: the well-to-do are promised stability and presented with social disintegration the poor are promised social disintegration and presented with a conspiracy on the part of their leaders to secure stability... In this Fools' Paradise it is not surprising to find that even the revolutionaries are only a sham, as full of bourgeois gullibility as the rest...."

Against all this Chesterton saw Fascism as representing the true inheritance of the Socialist tradition - collective control (not ownership) and organization of the means of production, distribution and exchange; and Socialism within one country. But, although he considered himself to have been a socialist ("a very large number of us, including our leader, have arrived at Fascism through the familiar process of sickening disillusionment experienced in the Socialist ranks")<sup>176</sup> he never really understood the creed, with its internationalist aspirations and ideas of a single-class dictatorship. He had always believed that "Socialism, in any real sense, can be created only in the passionate fires of patriotism."<sup>177</sup> While on the issue of class

dictatorship, he observed that; "The working classes are, in a very real sense, the backbone of the country, but the distinctive working class mentality is not the highest expression of the spirit of man."<sup>178</sup>

Chesterton's attitude towards Communism raises other important issues. He considered Communism to be the opposite pole on the 'materialist' political spectrum from Capitalism. It was simply the ultimate expression of working class materialism, as opposed to Capitalism's bourgeois money materialism. Both were self-interested ideologies devoted to smashing the autonomy of the nation-states, and therefore open to domination by the cosmopolitan Jews. In short - a classic conspiracy theory.

By calling for an international class uprising of the working class Communism, according to Chesterton, chooses to fight Capitalism on its own terms, in a self-interested struggle for wealth and power:<sup>179</sup>

"Here in essence is the entire calamity of Communism. Its advocates, in choosing to fight Capitalism on its own ground, have evolved almost identically the same outlook: indeed, in these days of giant monopolies even the gulf between individualism and collectivism has been effectively bridged, so that the so-called 'class-war' boils down to nothing more than a battle for wealth conducted by two sets of collectivists. Moreover, in a world of actual politics, any social order based upon such motives must see the battle for wealth transformed into the battle for power, in that beyond a certain point wealth has no value beyond a power value."

The last point about the battle for wealth inevitably being transformed into a battle for power is vital in seeking to understand Chesterton's conspiracy theory. For this allowed him to view Capitalism and Communism as materialist philosophies whose 'non-identical identity' is revealed in a naked struggle for self-interested power, largely orchestrated by a Jewish 'Cabal' intent upon establishing a world Government by force.



As a result Chesterton tended to fudge the issues on the differences between Capitalism and Communism:<sup>180</sup>

"The insurmountable truth here is that power-politics founded upon pure materialism must result in a slave-state, and a realistic nation has no desire to exchange the wage slavery imposed upon it by Capitalism for the still more complete regimentation of Communism, even though the latter strives for a juster economic relationship between man and his fellow men. Money talks no less under Communism than under Capitalism, and indeed, very much more loudly, because there are no boundaries to the scope of those who control it...Only recognition of inequality would prevent any Communist structure collapsing within a month."

On the question of Communist state economics he was no less dismissive:<sup>181</sup>

"While Fascists are the first to insist that private enterprise must be ruthlessly disciplined in order to solve the problems of distribution, they acknowledge the fact that private enterprise has already solved the problem of production without requiring to employ any...revolting schemes for humiliating the workers. In the Communist State the stress all the time must be on production - a desperate fight against laziness and inefficiency. When all the ingenuity of the State is taken up, as in the Communist system, it must always be taken up, by cajoling its citizens to do a job of work, it obviously cannot find either the time or the energy to bring about the boasted cultural millenium. Even more than in capitalist countries, government resolves itself into the business of concealment, catchwords and lies."

Underlying these attacks on the Communist system of government is Chesterton's fundamental belief in the power of the "national spirit" to animate Fascist theory in practice and to make it a workable system of totalitarianism:<sup>182</sup>

"Whether it be acknowledged or denied, the spirit of man and of nations is a living fact. When it is denied, either explicitly or tacitly, the result must always be its subjection to the forces of materialism, strange as the paradox may seem, that subjection militates against the securing of the material basis of life upon a satisfactory footing. Only by spiritual perceptions can man deal with life in terms other than disgrace.

The main difference between Communism and National Socialism, therefore, is that the former appeals to the self-interest of men and thereby fails in its most elementary of undertakings, whereas National Socialism mobilises the spirit to secure for the community a solid basis, and because of its fundamental disinterestedness it not only succeeds in the task, but in the process sets the captive spirit free."

As ever in Chesterton's Fascism we are thrown back to the level of mystical nationalism and spiritual utopianism.

. Mention of his belief that Capitalism and Communism were twin materialist philosophies, joined together in practice by the activities of the Jews, brings into sharp focus the conspiratorial dimension of his Fascist anti-Semitism. This was touched on briefly in Part 2 of this chapter, and the discussion of the possible causes for Chesterton's adoption of this belief will be dealt with in the concluding section of the chapter.\* For now it is sufficient to point to the fact that, while Chesterton's conspiratorial perspective permeates much of what he wrote as a Fascist, he had very little specific to say about this aspect of his thinking, especially if this is compared with his post-Second World War writings which are full of individual references to the supposed machinations of international Jewry, and contain copious references to the writings of previous conspiracy theorists.<sup>183</sup> Yet throughout his Fascist period Chesterton seemed contented with vague generalizations on the subject which differ little (except in the monotonous frequency with which they appear) from his pre-Fascist writings. Nor did he bother to refer to the 'classic' works of the conspiracy tradition in his Fascist propaganda; nor yet did he bother to devote a single major theoretical article to the subject.

The reason for this is difficult to explain without indulging in conjecture. For one thing it would appear that Chesterton had not bothered to read the major works of conspiratorial thinking prior to joining the B.U.F and that

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\*See below, pp 329-339.

he simply didn't bother to do so while in the movement, preferring, perhaps, to accept the "common sense" argument held by a good many of his Fascist colleagues. There is also the question of the time available to devote to such matters. Apart from his period of physical breakdown Chesterton was totally absorbed by his Blackshirt duties, and reading (which was not part of his prescribed duties) must have been a luxury. Chesterton was the "activist" par excellence, as Doris Chesterton's humorous piece in the Fascist Week demonstrates,\* and his output of articles in the Fascist press was truly phenomenal. Given this, and his weekly schedule of lectures, speeches, meetings and administrative duties, there is little wonder that he should have continued to rely on the 'common sense' theory of the nature of Jewish conspiratorial practices.

But, there can be no doubt that if Chesterton had wished to familiarise himself with these works and to place the conspiracy accusation at the very centre of his Fascist propaganda he could still have done so. It is necessary, therefore, to realize the degree to which his utopian optimism as a Fascist removed for him the need to speculate on the exact nature of the international Jewish conspiracy. His extreme nationalism convinced him that it was possible to defeat any such conspiracy at the national level simply by declaring Britain a Fascist state. With Fascism installed in Italy and National Socialism in Germany Chesterton was always optimistic for its eventual success in Britain. His Fascism was a creed of vitalistic optimism in which the

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\*See above, p232.

forces of decadence and decay could never win through against the purifying force of his creed - and there is little need to examine closely the techniques of conspiratorial power of one's enemy if his defeat is inevitable. To a hardened conspiracy theorist, as Chesterton himself was later to become, this attitude would appear naive in the extreme; but to Chesterton - the Fascist, 'revolutionary' - all that was necessary was to spread the message that Fascism was the answer to all the nation's problems. Thus he wrote that:<sup>184</sup>

"Our own philosophy...embraces the positive knowledge of man's heroic and god like qualities which must inevitably triumph over every savage impulse if only they are rescued from the sham idealisms now in possession of the human mind, and directed towards desirable social objectives with relentless energy and force."

This may help to explain why his Fascist writings contain so little of the dreary recital of instances of Jewish involvement in national and international affairs (accompanied by endless references and quotations) which is so marked a feature of his post-Fascist writings.\*

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\*There are one or two notable exceptions to this absence of detailed references. To some extent the article he wrote for the Fascist press in the wake of his 'researches' into Jewish involvement in national life contains specific references to areas of high Jewish influence, but does not give any details. (Cf. *Action*, November 7th, 1936.) Much closer in spirit to his later writings was his pamphlet Fascism and the Press (Sanctuary Press, London, n.d.) in which he gave the figure of 2½ million pounds for annual Jewish expenditure on national newspaper advertising, and follows this with a detailed exposé of the interlinked Jewish interests in publishing and big business.

## Part 4

Chesterton's Fascist Ideology: An Assessment.

Taking Chesterton's Fascist ideology as a whole it is apparent that it represented a direct development of his earlier views. Fascism offered him the chance to synthesize many hitherto unfocused ideas and attitudes, and gave him the opportunity of putting them into action under one political system.

One of the most striking things to emerge from this fact is that Chesterton's wholehearted acceptance of the Fascist creed was not, as Mosley later *inferred*, motivated simply by an urgent need to get into "a bigger and better fight" against the Jews. Rather he was initially attracted to the B.U.F. by the personality of its leader, its vision of the future Fascist nation state, and how it was proposed to achieve this end - placing national above sectional and class interests and refusing to align itself with either Capital or Labour. Nor was he attracted simply by its opposition to Jewish influence in national life, but because of its fierce rejection of all the forces of modernism and 'decadence' which Chesterton so despised. To him Fascism seemed to offer the best chance of combining the best of both the civilian and the military worlds - of uniting the virtues of the free citizen, with the disciplines, the will-to-action, and self-sacrifice of the soldier. In short, Chesterton approached British Fascism as a total ideology, and not simply as a rationalization of his anti-Semitic prejudices.

As a result, at the heart of his Fascism lay three, equally important, and interdependent, ideological themes. These were

cultural and conspiratorial anti-Semitism; neo-Spenglerian metahistoricism; and mystical nationalism. And anti-Semitism was no more the lowest common denominator amongst these themes than was cultural categorization, or nationalism. Perhaps the best illustration of how these themes mingled in his thinking can be seen in a piece he wrote almost ten years after leaving the B.U.F. and which also illustrates the fact that Chesterton's post-Fascist thinking retained these three ideological drives, long after he had rejected the utopian optimism and revolutionary zeal of Fascist authoritarianism:<sup>185</sup>

"I am what is called an anti-Semite mainly because I am a nationalist - a nationalist in the sense that I believe that every nation should have its own guiding star which it must follow, its own ideal pattern which it must trace, its own integration which it must maintain, its own vision of the past, its own distinctive character, its own soul. Nationalism, as I see it, is the dynamic of communal aspiration and growth, just as its opposite, cosmopolitanism, is the negation of these things, leading to the uprooting, debasement and decay of spiritual values. Whether I am right or wrong, that is my belief, and my further belief - no less firmly held - is that Jewry at almost every level of contact exerts an influence hostile to this national ideal."

Any assessment of Chesterton's Fascist commitment must take this complex of themes into account. It is simply not sufficient to analyse Chesterton's Fascist anti-Semitism sui generis and as long as the study of Chesterton's Fascism is narrowed down to such a perspective the fundamental ambiguity of his most extreme statements will continue to draw scholars away from a true understanding of his Fascist idealism towards an interpretation depending upon the demonology of a failed personality.

How then are we to assess Chesterton's Fascist anti-Semitism? Could a 'normal' individual come to express such abnormal ideas? He came to Fascism in despair at the betrayal of his nationalist

visions by an inter-war society marked by economic decline, social dislocation and moral bankruptcy. Fascism, while maintaining his cultural nationalism as the touchstone of his thought, also offered him conclusive 'proof' that the principal enemy of all he held dear was "the Jew":<sup>186</sup>

"Dreading more than anything else a virile nationalism, a resurgence of the people, he encourages every factor that makes for disunity, disruption and decay... Thus does he turn anti-Semitism from a mild disdain to a passionate... rage."

In this context it must not be forgotten that Chesterton's increasing hostility towards the Jews came not only from his absorption of the anti-Semitic ideas and ethos of the B.U.F., but also from direct confrontations with Jewish anti-Fascists. Naturally enough under the circumstances the Jewish community provided one of the chief sources of opposition to Fascism, and at one end of the spectrum of Jewish defence lay physical intimidation and violence. Simply to call oneself a Fascist in the 1930s was to invite trouble; to stand up and talk for Fascism at meetings, sometimes several times a week, as Chesterton did, and to walk on Fascist marches in the Leader's group, was to court positive danger. As one would expect under such circumstances, some of Chesterton's most abusive anti-Semitic pieces followed major clashes between Fascists and anti-Fascists in which he had been involved.

Inevitably, the combination of Fascist ideas absorbed by Chesterton in the B.U.F., and the street violence and abuse experienced by him, led his anti-Semitism to develop a self-sustaining dynamic of its own. Thus, from a conditioning element at the heart of his Fascism it had, by the end of his period with Mosley, attained considerable prominence in his writings.

Indeed, in the wake of his collapse of faith in Fascism, and the subsequent growth of his interest in the literature of conspiracy accusations, conspiratorial anti-Semitism became the dominant theme of his political philosophy.

Nevertheless, the question remains of how, if Chesterton was not a "classically prejudiced" authoritarian, he came to accept so sincerely such irrational ideas. With regard to his cultural categorization of the Jews and his racial categorization of coloured peoples it is necessary to understand the importance of Chesterton's South African background. T.F. Pettigrew, in his classic comparison of racial attitudes in South Africa, and in both the Southern and Northern United States, found that in South Africa and the Southern States, where strong traditions of anti-Black prejudice existed, racial prejudice was not especially related to personality characteristics.<sup>187</sup> Rather, he found that social conformity provided the basis for racist beliefs in such societies. Chesterton's birth into the British colonial elite in South Africa would therefore help to explain his racial paternalism towards blacks and coloureds. Since such attitudes were learned cultural norms in white South Africa.

Pettigrew concluded, however, that personality factors were more highly correlated with non-normative prejudices such as anti-Semitism, since even within a racially prejudiced social structure such as that in South Africa, anti-Semitism remains an essentially deviant political response. Yet this may not always have been so. If we look at the two periods of Chesterton's close involvement in South African society, his childhood years between 1903 and 1911 and his young adulthood between 1919 and 1924, it is apparent that these were peak periods of anti-Semitic



sentiment in South African history. The first period followed the Boer War in which British South Africans cast around for scapegoats for the causes of this wasteful war and for the failure to secure British dominance in the region after all the anguish and bloodshed. The general feeling that the Jews had brought about the war affected even the colonial authorities, with implications for European anti-Semitism, as James Webb has pointed out:<sup>188\*</sup>

"South African anti-Semitism has been much neglected. It was an important source of the prejudice in England and provided material for the French propagandists as well."

Evidence that Chesterton lived in a society containing socially acceptable anti-Semitism can be gleaned from the following exclamation by Chesterton: "as a young boy in Johannesburg I went to school with scores of Jews, and, so far from being aware of racial antipathy, I not only had some among my friends but resisted the pressure of elders who tried to make me give them up."<sup>189</sup> The fact that Chesterton ignored these requests is beside the point, since his adult anti-Semitism was never motivated by a personal antipathy towards the Jews and he continued to have Jewish friends throughout his life. What is important is that in the early years of this century anti-Semitism was a feature of British South African society and that behind the informal 'social' prejudice lay the belief that the Jews had somehow profited from the war by conspiratorial means. In short, he was born into the British colonial elite, many of whom were convinced that the Boers had only risen in revolt because of pressure from an international syndicate of Jews in league with the big gold mining interests in Johannesburg.

\* See also Colin Holmes account of this phenomenon in his Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939, pp 79-81.

His second exposure to South African attitudes occurred in the period 1919-1924, that is at a time of deep division in that already troubled and divided society. As we saw in Chapter Three, Afrikaner nationalism, in alliance with trade unionism and many elements of the Left in South Africa, were becoming disaffected from the Smuts' Government and the mining companies of the Rand. In the heated atmosphere of claims and counter claims which led eventually to the 1922 Revolt, anti-Semitism was often mixed with anti-Finance capitalism and anti-Communism in the propaganda war. Chesterton, who played so central a role in this dispute, was deeply affected by the problem, since he was forced to take the side of the Smuts' Government and thereby of the "multi-racial capitalists", against workers fighting for the colour bar; while the nationalists and workers mouthed the slogans of Bolshevism. Not unnaturally all this confused Chesterton and the experience seems to have left him with a vague suspicion that Jewish interests were involved on both sides, as he could understand neither the need of the bosses and the Smuts' Government to push the dilution of labour issue to such extremes, nor the motives of the workers in resorting to an armed uprising against the British endorsed regime. He therefore concluded that Jewish Communists had forced the hand of the workers, while Jewish finance capitalists had pushed the Smuts' Government into such precipitous action. Once again his position as a member of the white elite in South Africa helped to engender in him a socially acceptable moral and intellectual condemnation of supposed Jewish machinations.

Yet there is another element of his childhood socialization

which also had a direct bearing upon his willingness to accept the existence of a Jewish conspiratorial intent - his hero-worship of his two second cousins. At the time when A.K. was introduced to his illustrious relations they were deeply involved in the Marconi scandal. In 1912 Rufus Isaacs, Lloyd George and the chief whip of the Liberal Party were accused of dealing in shares in the Marconi company in the full knowledge that Marconi's tender for the construction of wireless stations for the Government had been accepted. For men like the Chesterton brothers, already of anti-Semitic inclinations, the crux of the matter lay in the fact that Rufus Isaacs's brother, Godfrey, was a director of Marconi and that both were Jews. Their suspicions were raised still further by the fact that it was Herbert Samuel who attempted to cover up the affair in Parliament.<sup>190</sup>

Cecil Chesterton was very closely involved in the issue, as he and Hilaire Belloc mounted an attack on the leading actors in the case in their paper The New Witness, and as a result of his conclusions that the financial system was controlled by the Jews, became a fanatical anti-Semite. G.K.'s attitude towards the Jews was also profoundly affected by the scandal, although he was by no means as obsessed as his brother. The whole affair ended with a successful libel action brought against Cecil Chesterton as the Editor of New Witness, by Godfrey Isaacs. Cecil Chesterton hailed his £100 fine as a moral victory, as did many of his supporters, convinced that a blow had been struck for public morals. Similarly, the Chesterton family view of the case was romantic in the extreme - refusing to acknowledge, as was in fact the case, that Cecil Chesterton was forced to withdraw his

allegations under pressure in Court. For his part G.K. remained convinced for the rest of his life that his brother had been the champion of public morals against corrupt and evil men.<sup>191</sup>

Into the middle of all this Chesterton family partisanship came young A.K. Chesterton. Admittedly he was only a member of the Herne Hill Chestertons (and was only there during the holidays), but A.K.'s grandfather, Arthur Chesterton, the head of the Herne Hill clan, was deeply involved in the family side of the libel case, taking it in turns with G.K. to bring back news of the proceedings to Cecil's parents. It was he who took the whole family for a "victory" lunch at a local hotel immediately after the court case was over.<sup>192</sup> One can well imagine, therefore, the general feeling in the Herne Hill household of solidarity with Cecil Chesterton.

Surrounded by this general atmosphere the boy was taken to visit his famous relations, with whom he was already acquainted in print. Chesterton recalled the meeting in his autobiography and recounts witnessing a 'prodigious debate' between the two intellectual giants through the luncheon party and on far into the afternoon. During the lulls, however, both men found time to interview their young cousin, each making a different impression upon him:<sup>193</sup>

"During one of them G.K.C. questioned me on how I liked English public school life. Much of my life had been spent abroad and I was able to make comparisons. Gilbert's manner was one of exquisite courtesy, but mingled with it a curious shyness. He spoke to me as one adult to another, which I found most flattering, but I felt that, not altogether at ease with himself, he was more concerned to put me at ease than to discover much about my school life. Cecil later questioned me on the same subject, but his approach was very different. He fired question after question at me with machine-gun rapidity and with penetrating aim. In ten minutes there were few of my thoughts and aspirations he did not know - and remember."

These first impressions, when allied to the results of the Marconi case, drew Chesterton's youthful admiration:

"I went away with two heroes to worship, but in different ways, Gilbert, I reflected, was the genius filled with splendid dreams (and with such gorgeous humour in his poems and early novels), but Cecil was the man with his eye on the ball. Soon afterwards, when Cecil's name became headline news because of his being prosecuted during the 'Marconi Scandal' on a charge of criminal libel against Godfrey Isaacs, I became convinced that he was the man I must choose as my own exemplar...As a very young officer on the Western Front I sometimes asked myself which of my relations would I rather have by my side in a desperately tight corner. Cecil always sprang to mind..."

The net result would seem to have been to convince Chesterton that conspiracies of international finance not only exist, but should be exposed:

"I was in the Army of the Rhine when I heard of Cecil's death in a military hospital in France. Presumptuously, perhaps, I wrote a letter to Gilbert expressing the hope that his brother's fight against contemporary evils, especially the conspiracies of international finance, would not be allowed to lapse...Answer came there none."

In the context of the present discussion the most important fact in this process is that such ideas had been presented to Chesterton in a context of social acceptability. After all his cousins were nationally acclaimed intellectuals and while G.K. was more generally known through his literary writings, Cecil Chesterton was known in the London debating rooms to be a man who could more than hold his own with the likes of Bernard Shaw and the Webbs. A brilliant debater, he was also a very gifted journalist whose prose "remains lively and pungent".<sup>194</sup> That such distinguished men should have been willing to preach anti-Semitism, without the obvious censure of the rest of the adult Chestertons, must have assisted in giving young A.K. the impression that such ideas were "acceptable", indeed, laudible.

By tracing these pressures of socialization in Chesterton's childhood and young adulthood, it is apparent that a case can be made out to show that, to some extent at least, his adult receptivity to this essentially 'deviant' value system was a result of social conformity, rather than the consequence of a personality defect. This may also help to explain why Chesterton did not develop his anti-Semitic prejudices to any marked degree prior to his involvement in Fascist politics.

The work of the social psychologist Michael Billig can help to illustrate the way in which Chesterton could have made the final transition to Fascist anti-Semitism through what we can recognize as "normal" processes of reasoning. In the Introduction\* I dealt with the basic nature of Billig's work. By far the most important aspect of his work in relation to Chesterton's ideas is that which deals with the cognitive element behind conspiratorial anti-Semitism.

On the whole Billig agrees with Pettigrew that national, cultural and social conditioning offers the best explanation of ethnocentrism and racialism, in societies where such reactions flourish. In the case of the more 'deviant' ideology, the conspiracy theory, Billig offers a more complex theory of causation. He asserts that the conspiracy minded individual:<sup>195</sup>

"aims to situate prejudice in a historical pattern of conspiracy, rather than view it as the product of spontaneous and ahistorical emotion. Moreover, the conspiracy mentality needs itself to be studied in a historical context. As has been emphasised, the conspiracy theory...is a continuation of a lengthy historical tradition."

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\*See above: ppxxi-xxiv.

Billig is suggesting that conspiratorial prejudice can be presented, and accepted, as a 'valid' historical doctrine. It can even be given a pseudo-academic gloss. In short, it can be intellectually acceptable to a 'normal' individual. Billig is very clear on this point:<sup>196</sup>

"When looking at the social psychological dynamics of so bizarre an outlook as the conspiracy theory, it is easy to over emphasise its eccentricities at the expense of noticing what is psychologically common-place. It is not necessary to assume that the conspiracy theorist has a completely different cast of mind from the average person and that it must be described from a unique psychological perspective. History has shown that at times numbers of both educated and uneducated people have embraced the conspiracy outlook."

This allows Billig to reject a priori psychological disturbances as the necessary determinant of the conspiracy mentality and instead to concentrate on some of the cognitive aspects and functions associated with it, and therefore to discuss it in relation to current social psychological theories of "normal cognitive operations". He tells us that recent research in this area has suggested that the search for causation is one of the most crucial of human activities and that possession of developed causal schemata, far from being deviant, is the common norm.<sup>197</sup> Thus, an attempt to make sense of the world through a conspiracy theory can be a rational response.

Billig further suggests that while events unfold according to expectations, causal explanations will tend to be conventional and dependent upon the acceptance of everyday reality. A significant break with these expectations, however, may call for extraordinary explanations:<sup>197</sup>

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"The believer in a conspiracy theory will consider that the world has taken some unusual turns. The older believer might well have been brought up to expect that Britain would remain a major imperial power and that the 'natives' would remain subservient; certainly they would remain abroad. He might see lapses in traditional standards of propriety, read about increases in crime and watch as familiar landmarks are pulled down to make way for developments. None of this would have been predicted; as a boy he might have expected the world to carry on in much the same way. If the developments are seen as abnormal and even threatening, then, as the psychological theories emphasise there is nothing disturbed about seeking explanations; drastic effects might thus require drastic causes."

Billig is, of course, speaking in the context of present day Britain: but can we doubt that this applied to Chesterton in an even more exaggerated fashion, faced, as he was, with an early manhood crammed with brutal war and severe economic and social dislocation in his beloved England, both following a childhood in the safe world of the pre-1914 colonial elite? There can have been few cases in history of such a brutal transition from the expectations of childhood to the grim realities of manhood.

Looking back over his life Chesterton expressed this sense of discontinuity very clearly:<sup>198</sup>

"Those of us who were born around the turn of the century can only reflect in amazement and perplexity upon the changes which the intervening years have brought, changes not only in national fortune but in the entire shape and colour and climate of life. In those days of our nonage standardization had not yet become a social and political ideal. I remember my early conception of the French as a comically gifted race whose particular genius lay in their capacity to eat frogs. The supreme function of Germany was to fill our streets with the brave music of peripatetic brass bands. Italy's sumptuous contribution to a small boy's world was the organgrinder and his monkey. My romantic vision glowed ever more brightly the further afield it wandered... On growing older my admiration sought other objects, but the delicious wonder at the rich diversities of race did not cease to enthrall me. The graciousness of France, the clarity and wit and flair for living of the French people; the incredible fecundity of the Italian spirit; indeed, the splendour and manifold distinctions of European genius - one rejoiced in these things because one knew them to be a part of the common heritage of mankind."

Continued/.....



"...our Imperial destiny, as it seemed to us, was essentially a projection and intensification of this feeling of kinship...

Today the vision has faded...The explanation, I am sure, is not that we have grown older. Age tends rather to deepen than to destroy one's sense of mystery and enchantment. But for those of our generation who have lived through so much disillusionment the particular kind of ecstasy of which I have been writing and thinking is dead, and we shall never know its like again...I was taught a sharper lesson on the nature of power. My boyhood was foreshortened; all too brief were my brisk winter afternoons on the Rugby field, my tranquil summer evenings at the wicket or the nets...."

Chesterton was certainly one of those for whom a drastic disparity existed between the expectations of childhood and the realities of adulthood and who, consequently, cast around for drastic explanations.

Another aspect of Billig's analysis which has direct relevance to the present study is that in which he discusses the case for seeing the conspiracy tradition as a product of the wider philosophical traditions of the society which produces the conspiracy minded individual. He notes that one of the characteristic distinguishing features of a conspiratorial world view is the belief that most of the world's evils are attributable to the conscious machinations of a few evil individuals:<sup>199</sup>

"In the language of social psychological theories of causal attribution, the conspiracy theorist could be said to make 'personal' attributions, rather than 'situational' attributions' In other words it is assumed that actions have occurred because of the character of the actors concerned, and not because of the situations in which they have found themselves... It may well be that conspiracy theories flourish in those cultural contexts where personal or psychological explanations are encouraged over situational or sociological explanations."

Drawing on the work of J.M. Roberts, Billig suggests that such a cultural context was indeed provided as the by-product of the main post-Renaissance philosophy of history: "classical and central to European civilization, that men were responsible for

their own history: things happened because people wanted them to."<sup>200</sup> Reading this one is reminded forcibly of Chesterton's deep belief in the essentially volitional nature of man - "the supremacy of human will"; "time provides the opportunities for events, but it is we and we alone who shape these events."<sup>201</sup> Doris Chesterton also recalls that: "Kenneth never accepted the word 'inevitable', he believed that mankind had a strong hold on its destiny."<sup>202</sup>

The bulk of the evidence which has been presented in this chapter on Chesterton's Fascist anti-Semitism points towards the conclusion that this aspect of his thinking was neither inspired by the promptings of a pathological mind, nor motivated by biological categorizations of the Jewish peoples.

In fact Chesterton's anti-Semitism was based upon a number of cultural preoccupations, rather than, as with Hitler, upon fears of 'blood pollution'. It also explains why Chesterton joined the British Army in 1939, since for him the essence of Fascism was nationalism and his definition of "race" could only encompass the concept of a nation-culture.\* Thus, he simply couldn't understand Hitler's territorial aggrandisement, spurred on as it was by preoccupations with the need for "living space" for Aryan man and the need to eliminate the biologically inferior races of the world before they overwhelmed him with their diseased blood. It is not enough simply to fasten on to

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\*Colin Holmes has suggested that the use of animal imagery by men like Chesterton suggests a belief in a "biologically rooted culture", rather than a direct genetic endowment. But even if this was so it does not alter appreciably the fact that what he was principally concerned with was the protection of British "culture" from the economic, social and cultural influence of the Jews, and not their biological threat to the British nation. Cf. Colin Holmes, Anti-Semitism in British Society- 1876-1939, 1979, p228.

the more extreme imagery used by Chesterton, with its inevitable ambiguities, and to conclude thereby that he was a biological determinist. Only by a thorough investigation of the whole of Chesterton's Fascist ideology can we come to understand the true nature of his anti-Semitism and his Fascism. For we cannot make a rule by simply citing the exceptions alone.

Much of this analysis has centred upon the use of a non-inductivist approach; that is, it has been assumed that men like Chesterton did not face the moral choice over genocide and war when they adopted the Fascist solution in the early 1930s. It is noticeable that when this choice was made apparent to him in 1939, he chose to fight Nazism and to condemn genocide.\* Of course, there is a simpler explanation; that he dropped his "genocidal" beliefs for tactical reasons, along with his "pro-Nazism". That many ex-Fascists were motivated by this desire for respectability in a world now fully conversant with the true meaning of Nazism, there can be no doubt. But, in Chesterton's case, given the weight of evidence against this interpretation, this would seem to be an incorrect conclusion to draw. Unless, that is, we are to adopt Chesterton's conspiratorial mentality and assume an evil intent as a better explanation than the uncomfortable facts, then we must accept him for what he was: a Fascist anti-Semite (with all the odium that must incur) but not a Nazi racial determinist. To some this will be merely to play with words. But I believe it to be a vital distinction. It does not lessen the tragedy of Chesterton's adoption of anti-Semitic beliefs; if anything it heightens it:

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\*See Chapter 7 below.

Because, for him, a combination of life experiences and a process of 'normal' intellectual reasoning were largely responsible for his acceptance of such beliefs.

As a preface to the study of the second major element in Chesterton's Fascist ideology (his passionate nationalism) and as a postscript to the analysis of his anti-Semitism, it is important to look at the work of Professor Michael Biddiss on the racist ideology of Count Arthur de Gobineau - 'the father of racist ideology'.<sup>203</sup> For Biddiss concludes that Gobineau's racial preoccupations transcended any allegiance to nationalism which he might have initially felt, and argues that in fact racism and extreme nationalism are often mutually exclusive ideologies:<sup>204</sup>

"National feeling is not, as is frequently thought, the necessary ally of race-thinking. Though they may sometimes coexist they are also frequently opposed. When patriotism is the mark of a clearly defined territorial society it may have little relevance to an essentially...supra national philosophy such as Gobineau was to develop. As his concern with race deepened so nationalism, as such, could be dismissed as unworthy of respect."

Chesterton was, of course, inspired by a very definite nationalist ideal, centred on a clearly defined territorial society - and his anti-Semitism was based on cultural distinctions between Jews and non-Jews. As a result his Fascism deepened both his nationalism and his anti-Semitism. Had Chesterton, like Gobineau, adopted a racial classification of his own people, he would have been forced to admit a "racial" affinity with Frenchmen, Italians and Germans. It is noticeable also that he chose not to stress that aspect of Spengler's thinking which involved the concept of "Faustian" man, that is European man. In an article

published in the Blackshirt in 1937, Chesterton wrote:<sup>205</sup>

"We shall not call upon the workers of the world to unite, because the Russian worker is not the same as the Italian worker, the Italian worker is not the same as the German worker, and the German worker is not the same as the British worker.

In every country the workers must solve their national problems according to their own temperaments and needs; any attempt to reduce fundamentally different characteristics to one standard pattern can only end in a crazy internationalism with the true internationalists - the Jews - still more securely mounted in the saddle of control."

Small wonder, given such beliefs, that he could not understand Hitler's wish to "Aryanise" the world under the direction of the Third Reich.

. Biddiss also has some interesting comments to make about the part racism played in the development of Gobineau's mature philosophy, insisting that Gobineau adopted racial categorisation as a way of dealing with *class related* problems which were of central importance to him. These problems which had long obsessed Gobineau were centred upon his fears that the European aristocracy was in absolute decline under the threat posed by a number of trends in modern society:<sup>206</sup>

"These ideas - materialism, egalitarianism, democracy, socialism and nationalism - were forces working towards the further disruption of the social order. The racial theory appears to link them all to the ill effects of miscegenation and to suggest that they were simply its consequences. Our contention has been that the relationship was quite the reverse. In reality, the Essai\* sprang from the deep felt need to provide an all embracing explanation of the development of these harmful ideas. Its primary purpose was not to expound a racial theory, as such, but to manipulate such a theory for the sake of attacking the destructive 'progressive' doctrines of the nineteenth century...the racial theory was the upshot of certain views of society and human nature, and...these views were inseparable from one another and were the result of the primarily non-racial experiences and observations traced in the first part of the study."

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\*The Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines, was Gobineau's first major racist work.

In some ways this process parallels that of Chesterton's intellectual development. For, while he was informally anti-Semitic long before he adopted Fascism, he was much more concerned in his pre-Fascist thinking with certain trends in modern society - materialism, democracy, Communism, liberalism, monopoly capitalism, mass culture - trends which he subsumed under the general title of "decadence". Fascist anti-Semitism offered Chesterton the chance to focus his rejection of these ideas and social forces which he had come to despise through primarily non-anti-Semitic observations.

This is not to doubt the sincerity with which Chesterton came to hold these views. During the Fascist period Chesterton became a convinced conspiracy theorist and ethnocentrist and, in spite of his rejection of Fascism, remained so for the remainder of his life. Extreme anti-Semitism may have initially been a conditioning element, but once installed in his system of beliefs it gained a self sustaining dynamic which it never lost in his thinking. Gobineau also exhibited this tendency and Biddiss makes the following interesting observation on this phenomenon:<sup>207</sup>

"None the less, in discussing the future extension of his thinking beyond the Essai, we do need to take account of what Jacques Barzun has termed, 'the "quality of belief" that a fine intellect accords to the myths of its own manufacture.' For there is no doubt as to the sincerity with which Gobineau came to maintain his racist philosophy. Because of such a conviction on his part we must note the effect of the theory upon his subsequent thought."

There can be absolutely no doubt that nationalism was central to Chesterton's Fascism. As we have seen, his nationalism had deep roots in his childhood patriotism as formed in the context of colonialism and the British public school system. The

transition from youthful patriotic idealism to what might be termed radical-patriotism, took place through the medium of his war and post war experiences, which not only convinced him of the moral validity of national cooperation and selfless sacrifice for the common national good, but also shattered his already minimal faith in democratic institutions. His activities in local politics in Torquay initially softened his views on democracy. But when the new councillors returned to the old self-interested, class dominated, Tory politics, he withdrew all support for this system of national guardianship, and his nationalism became focused on the ideals of disinterested leadership and selfless devotion by the masses to the national good.

He drew added inspiration from his aesthetic idealism and cultural despair. On the one hand he developed a vision of nationally inspired artistic creation, with Shakespeare as the exemplar, as the key to moral and political truth. This was paralleled by the growth of his cultural despair with the inevitable clash which occurred between his poetic ideals and the continued growth of a mass society and an increasingly internationalist world order in which all values, whether material or spiritual, were exported across national boundaries, undermining national traditions. Art, for him a pointer to national health, appeared to him to be increasingly debased by 'cosmopolitan' values. In an artistic world containing Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism, Expressionism, 'stream of consciousness' novels and poems, and many kinds of modern music,

(all products of this growing internationalism) posterity will judge Chesterton's beliefs as backward looking reaction and philistinism. But to him the criteria of great art rested on its relationship to national cultural traditions. Prior to his adoption of the Fascist creed, he was willing to admit that Epstein's stark modernism had a part to play in the growth of artistic creativity, but Fascism ended such liberality in his thinking turning his nationalism into a narrow chauvinism. Because now he considered that national culture was in danger of collapsing altogether and had therefore to protect itself totally against 'alien' influences:

"National culture, a living and growing thing, can absorb even poisons and use them for its growth..."

Chesterton's political and cultural nationalism merged into the Fascist synthesis through the agency of Spenglerian metahistorical values. This gave his nationalism an almost mystical quality and allowed Chesterton to wildly speculate that Fascism would finally triumph in Britain because of an "instinct of British blood"; He also wrote that: "Fascism tells the people of Britain that they are temperamentally and spiritually fitted to assume the leadership of the nations of the earth."<sup>208</sup> Indeed, his Fascist nationalism was a truly utopian revolutionary vision. He wrote of the advent of "a civilization such as the world has not known before",<sup>209</sup> and of establishing "in Britain an order of civilization never before approached by mankind."<sup>210</sup> This is why he so totally rejected Conservatism with its defence of the status quo in the name of the past, believing instead that Fascism was based upon total self-sacrifice to all the needs of the nation - past, present and future:<sup>211</sup>



"The only 'right' the National Socialist acknowledges is the right to serve and sacrifice...he insists upon a system of organic growth with its roots in the past, but with its future under the direction of man's brain and heart."

This led Chesterton into utopian optimism for the power of the Fascist corporate state to facilitate the merging of the political state with the cultural nation - military organization and unquestioning devotion to duty, allied to the creative talents of the free individual. He never stopped to think that these might be fundamentally irreconcilable forms of social and political organization. This stemmed from his unquestioning faith in the mystical power of the national ideal. His Fascist writings are literally infused with the language of mysticism. He wrote of: "the mystical truth of the paradox that in order to have a life a man must first lose it...to the State," and called for "the corporate activity which the soul's health demands."<sup>212</sup> He believed that Fascism would build "a civilization based upon spiritual values as distinct from commercial values."<sup>213</sup> There is much talk, as in his pre-Fascist heroic vitalism, of "the life-force in its war against spiritual death," and "the life-forces of the spirit embattled against decadence."<sup>214</sup> At his most utopian Chesterton even suggested that Fascism was a rebirth of the true Christian spirit:<sup>215</sup>

"...it is the beginning of a new way of life which is also the Christian way of life...It is the first modern recognition of the mystic truth of the Brotherhood of Man and the need to translate this truth in terms of political action. It is the lifting of the barrage in the great spiritual battle for peace on Earth, goodwill towards all men and the lost joy of adventure and life."

He could only say this because of his passionate belief that a 'reborn' British nation, freed from international influences, would, once again, extend the hand of friendship to the world.

Perhaps the main lesson to be learnt from this discussion of Chesterton's Fascist ideology is that it is not sufficient to look at his anti-Semitism in isolation from the rest of his Fascist beliefs. In the process we have looked both at what he was against as a Fascist and what he believed Fascism to stand for. Professor Juan J. Linz has recognized the importance of this side of Fascist ideology in dealing with men like Chesterton: <sup>216</sup>

"it still has to be explained why in so many countries [Fascist parties] could recruit a small but devoted following of activists, and how men who had achieved positions of influence in other parties in the thirties broke with them and felt moved to create fascist movements...In this context we have to pay infinitely more attention to the positive appeal rather than the 'anti themes' of Fascism, the ideological, intellectual, and emotional needs it satisfied. Here the poetry, the symbolism, the rhetoric, the new forms of political participation offered by Fascism became central.

Without denying the importance of psychological factors, the positive appeal of fascism can also be used to explain the success of the movements among certain social groups, like students, veterans, officers, certain segments of the old elites, even some types of literary intellectuals...It would seem as if the academic intelligensia would be attracted to the social democrats and the literary intelligensia to the fascists. Certainly the emphasis on rhetoric, style, romanticism, cultural critique of society of the fascists had its attraction for this type of intelligensia."

There can be little doubt that Fascism offered to Chesterton a symbolism, rhetoric and form of political participation which was almost guaranteed to gain Chesterton's allegiance. At the most basic level the B.U.F. offered him the chance to participate in a movement whose leadership shared both his ideas and his background. Indeed, the sociology of the B.U.F. made it the natural choice for Chesterton. Mandle's study of the leadership of the B.U.F. suggests that the composite picture of a British Fascist leader would consist of a man in his thirties, educated at a public school, solid middle class, who had served as an officer in the Great War, travelled widely

since that time and had difficulty in settling down in the civilian world. There can be little doubt that Chesterton fits this composite sociological model very well.

But if the sociology of the leadership alone had attracted Chesterton then he could equally have found a home in the more conventional circumstances of the Conservative Party. No: Chesterton came to Fascism because of its ideas, and those ideas he adapted to his own ends. The net result was a Fascism characterized by heroic vitalism, spiritual utopianism and mystical idealism. Chesterton was searching for a world which would be free of doubt, purged of all foreign accretions; a world based on the absolute values of the nation state. A truly 'national' community would, he believed, give back to man his authenticity, since the individual, through his participation in the communal whole, could at last experience the true fulfilment of his most basic human needs. No more would problems of class, caste and coterie, bedevil mankind. Men would act as one in solving the problems confronting society, since all would act with selfless disinterestedness for the common good. As a result the nation's decline into decadence would be halted and reversed, and the old values of heroism and virtue would flourish once again in the revitalised nation. The community would, for the first time, be governed by a unified system of values beyond the reach of self-interest and materialistic greed.

Ultimately, Chesterton's Fascism represented a desire to transcend the banality of the bourgeois world, and to give to life a new meaning based upon almost religious mysticism. For him Fascism was young, new, modern. It was a revolt against decadence on behalf of the "life-force", a revolution of the

spiritual over the material. Even economics was to be governed by a corporate ethic to produce the "moral economy". Chesterton would almost certainly have agreed with Leon Degrelle, the Belgian Fascist, who wrote that: "the great revolutions are not political or economic...the true revolution...overhauls not the engine of the State, but the secret life of each soul."<sup>217</sup>

Chesterton saw Fascism as a poetic movement, in tune with the non-rational needs of men (which he had stressed so often in his pre-Fascist aesthetic idealism) and without which no political movement could hope to achieve the needed spiritual unity of the masses to solve the nation's problems. As such economics, and the reality of politics, were of little concern to him, since the needed spiritual unity would, if created, lead to the disappearance of such minor problems. Fascism would be the resurgence of the creative spirit of the nation and would produce a new world of beauty and aesthetic form - "the Fascist gold age."<sup>218</sup>

"The heroes of the democratic world are not its prophets, its poets, its unselfish leaders (if they exist under democracy), its strugglers, its splendid failures, but its flamboyantly successful individuals, its millionaires...egotism, ruthlessness and sharp practice all take their part in the making of a bourgeois hero...Fascism will reverse these possibilities... to lead the mind and spirit of man into a new orientation, with service instead of money as the new value. That is the main revolution which Fascism seeks to achieve - a revolution destroying the bourgeois concepts of monetary success and other meretricious values in order to harness the devotion of the people to the building up of a society without class barriers, in which every individual instinctively harmonises his own interests within the confines of the general community interest...the only kind of revolution which can give dignity, poise, and an assured survival-basis to the nation."

In following these values to their ultimate conclusion Chesterton erected a system of absolute spiritual values which transcended the reality of the situation and allowed him to

indulge in the most debased polemics against all his enemies. Thus, as his spiritual values soared ever higher into utopian mysticism, his anti-Semitic insults plumbed new depths.

Chesterton believed that he was hitting out at a powerful enemy bent on destroying his dream of a unified nation and responded with every insult at his disposal. Indeed, he indulged in the most debased polemics against all those he considered to be attempting to undermine Fascism, writing of "the spiritual pox of Bloomsbury" and the "Huxley virus".<sup>219</sup>

But what lay behind these insults was not a biological determinist consciousness seeking to assign racial inferiority to his enemies, but rather an individual desperately seeking the spiritual regeneration of the nation through Fascist corporatism. As such Chesterton represents that strand of Fascism characterised by Professor Zeev Sternhell as:<sup>220</sup>

"This mystical, romantic, anti-rationalist fascism...as much a moral and aesthetic system as a political philosophy: it constituted a complete vision of man and the community."

This places Chesterton amongst that group of Fascists in inter-war Europe whose leading figures included Leon Degrelle in Belgium, Jose Antonio Primo Rivera in Spain, and Drieu la Rochelle in France. Those men who believed that, in the last resort, only the spiritual unity of the nation (usually defined in cultural and organic terms) could provide a true basis for political, economic and social revival. For them human creativity could only function from out of the depths of a spiritual entity symbolized by the nation.<sup>221</sup>

## Postscript

### Mosley, Joyce, and Chesterton: A Comparison.

Mosley launched the B.U.F. with the slogan: "I have finished with those who think; henceforth I shall go to those who feel."<sup>222</sup> In recruiting Chesterton to the cause he certainly achieved this ambition: "There are two approaches to National Socialism - the path of feeling and the path of thought...The first approach is by far the most vital, in that instinct is swifter than logic, and the emotional comprehension of a truth immeasurably more compulsive than the most efficient mental process."<sup>223</sup>

There is a deep irony here, as Mosley's Fascist ideology was based largely on thought rather than emotion, and this marks an unbridgeable gap between the two men's fascist ideals. Not that Mosley and Chesterton differed in the reasons behind their activist commitment to Fascism. In many ways both were driven to act by a shared sense of duty to the 'warriors', both dead and living, of the Great War, and an equally vehement hatred of the 'Old Gang' of established political elites. They also shared a vision of "war socialism", a vision of classless cooperation in the common cause of the nation. Both were therefore dismissive of the self-interested political bargaining of democratic processes and searched for action and certainty in the realm of authoritarianism based upon the corporate identity of nation and state. And both insisted that only an inspired leadership could lead to the realization of their utopian society of the future. In short, they shared an emotional commitment to sweep away the shams and betrayals of a bourgeois

past, if necessary at all costs. It was this which brought them together in the cause of Fascism. Robert Skidelsky has clearly expressed this side of Mosley's Fascist commitment:<sup>224</sup>

"Mosley was a product of his landed background and his war experiences. Both combined in revolt against the flabbiness of politics and the sham values of bourgeois life. This was the psychological dynamic of his Fascism, not his rational economic policy or even his 'rational' argument about the inevitability of collapse...these considerations would never have weighed so powerfully with him had he not felt such a violent hostility to the old world."

However, while Chesterton undoubtedly shared with Mosley this "psychological dynamic", he differed markedly from him in his ideas about the future fascist utopia and the means by which it might be realized. In this respect Mosley's more 'rational' approach was important. Skidelsky highlights Mosley's "cold, rational, logical" cast of mind,<sup>225</sup> and this, coupled with his acceptance of certain tenets of "materialist" philosophy, has led to the description of him as an "authoritarian modernizer".

Throughout his career in mainstream politics he was above all concerned with the material circumstances of his fellow men, and his ultimate decision to form a Fascist movement rested largely upon his despair at the economic inertia of conventional inter-war politics. In some ways he was a gifted bureaucrat concerned to seek and apply 'rational' solutions to pressing economic and social problems. Consequently he tended to place less emphasis on the 'spiritual' and irrational appeal of the Fascist creed. He wrote that:"the supreme mission of Fascism in the world [is] to create a revival in the spirit of man which is a prerequisite to a revival in the material environment."<sup>226</sup> Chesterton, on the other hand, tended to reverse these priorities in his thinking:<sup>227</sup>

Over/.....

"Fascism's first task is to obtain masterdom over the mechanics of living, and thus secure a satisfactory material basis of life for the population. The main stress thereafter is lifted clear of materialism and concentrated upon the development of the individual spirit...Once the conception has been brought into general use both private property and Communism will dwindle into relative insignificance against the splendour of the civilization which will be built up by Fascist brains and the Fascist ideal of service to the cause."

But there was another level to this ideological divide between the two men, which may also help to explain Chesterton's disagreement with Mosley over the organization of the B.U.F. in its quest for political power. Because of his basically rational approach to politics Mosley always remained able to balance his ideals with the need to see them realized in practice - even when the task was as difficult as trying to realize a Fascist state in Britain. As a result he was prepared, on occasion, to compromise between the immediate needs of the Party in its struggle for power, and the doctrinal purity of the movement. It was this side of Mosley's personality, as Skidelsky points out, which coloured his disagreement with John Strachey in the New Party during 1931, as Mosley:<sup>228</sup>

"felt no guilt about the 'lower self' and lacked entirely the moral compulsion to strangle it in the 'higher' interests of civilization. The...clash between the two men was at bottom the clash between the moral and pagan attitudes to life."

So, too, was the clash between Chesterton and Mosley. For Chesterton was nothing if not a man obsessed by morality, and as a result Mosley could expect little support from Chesterton for his attempts to turn the B.U.F. into a realistic instrument for gaining political power. This explains Chesterton's outburst late in 1937, when he suggested that the interests of the Party should be subordinated to those of the movement, since: "The end does not justify the means unless the means be good, because evil means corrupt the end."<sup>229</sup>



Perhaps the clearest example of these differences to appear in Chesterton's writings is contained in his official biography of Mosley. He concludes the work by presenting us with a speech of Mosley's which combines an attempt to reassure his audience that the future Fascist utopia would not be governed by the revolutionary elite of the existing Fascist movement, with his belief that material regeneration will automatically lead to spiritual harmony:<sup>230</sup>

"A humanity released from poverty and from many of the horrors and afflictions of disease to the enjoyment of a world reborn through science will need a Fascist movement transformed to the purpose of a new and noble order of mankind; but you will need no more the strange and disturbing men who, in the days of struggle and danger, the nights of darkness and of Labour, have forged the instruments of steel by which the world shall pass to higher things."

Chesterton's response to these words stands out in stark contrast to the rest of this adulatory work, for it is in direct contradiction to Mosley's assertion:<sup>231</sup>

"More likely it is in my view, that there will always be a need for the 'strange and disturbing men', no matter how many problems have been solved, to maintain their posts in the watchtowers of mankind, eternally devoted, eternally vigilant - the sentries who maintain watch and ward over the nation's soul."

Unlike Mosley he has no concept of the need to reassure potential Fascist supporters that there would be no 'permanent revolution' within a Fascist state. Nor does he accept that a material revolution will be sufficient, of itself, to realize the basis of a truly Fascist Britain.

In the end it was not enough for Chesterton, simply to solve the economic and social problems of society. What was really needed, in his opinion, was to transcend them through spiritual regeneration. Thus, to slightly exaggerate their respective positions: while Mosley's vision of the Fascist utopia ended with

the technocrat in control of the 'statistical state'; Chesterton's culminated with the theologians of Fascism in control of the 'moral economy', and you don't sack the evangelical priests of a religion until the resurrection on the final day of judgement!\*

But, if Chesterton's earnest nationalist-mysticism (and sincere cultural and conspiratorial anti-Semitism) separates him from Mosley, it also distances him from William Joyce's brand of Fascist irrationalism. In many ways Joyce does fit the picture of a racial determinist so often attributed to Chesterton, and there are good grounds for suggesting that Joyce did indeed come to Fascism largely through the agency of his exaggerated fear and obsessional hatred of the Jews, providing an almost textbook example of the classically prejudiced personality. His Fascism was based upon racial determinism of the Nazi variety and within the B.U.F. he was openly scornful of Mosley's National Socialist credentials (whereas Chesterton would seem to have genuinely believed in Mosley).

In contrast to Chesterton, Joyce had a long history of rabid anti-Semitism behind him by the time he joined the B.U.F. As early as 1923 he had joined the British Fascisti of Miss. R.L.

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\*I am not suggesting in this comparison that Mosley's Fascism was characterized entirely by its materialist rationality. In fact his economic critique was based upon a critical reading of Spengler's work, coupled with a distinctly Shavian perspective. As Skidelsky shows, Mosley also rejected any materialist theory of progress, adopting a Lamarckian approach instead and believing that the species evolves through individual striving and effort, with the outstanding individual at the centre of this evolutionary purpose. Mixed with his Shavian beliefs this view of 'purposive evolution' precluded any materialist psychology, or philosophy of history. (See Skidelsky, op cit., p476.) The result was also 'Superman economics' - the belief that he, Mosley, was the 'man of destiny' the 'Caesar man', who would prevent the doom of European civilization by his precipitous actions. He once described Fascism as "collective Caesarism". Also, as Fascism was increasingly marginalised in British politics, Mosley tended to become less and less rational in his promotion of such beliefs.

Linton-Orman, and thereafter employed his talents in a single minded attack on all forms of Jewish society. The combination of his belligerent and obsessive personality and the extreme nature of his beliefs, served to place him outside the sphere of normal social and intellectual discourse.

Evidence of this can be found even before he left University. A gifted student of English literature and language (he received a First Class Honours degree from Birkbeck college in 1927), he was president of the university Conservative Society, and was known for his "overbearingly dogmatic manner" of public speaking. One woman lecturer later recalled his first appearance at one of her classes because he appeared in his O.T.C. uniform and carrying a gun. She remembered thinking: "If he's as mad as he looks he may well stand up and shoot me."<sup>232</sup>

Further evidence of his inability to function normally in wider society can be gleaned from his attempts to participate in the Birkbeck Drama Group. Joyce was cast as a traveller in one production who, armed with a stick, had to beat off two attackers. In rehearsal Joyce grew so excited in his role that he actually attacked his make-believe assailants, depriving one of a tooth, and driving the other off the stage.<sup>233</sup>

At this time he was also contributing to the college magazine, The Loadstone, of which the following extract of verse is typical:<sup>234</sup>

"...that impious reptile Shaw,  
and Arlen, Pandar, 'gainst all virtue soured,  
And sickly, putrid, maggot-eaten Coward.  
Away with livid plays of modern sex,  
Eradicate, destroy, efface 'complex' !  
In days when martial valour was appraised,  
They loved a duel or standard raised;  
But now Hypocrisy and Humane Cant  
Transform the soldier's honest blows to rant."

The piece contains an attack on two of Chesterton's literary heroes - Coward and Shaw. The verses were written at the time when Chesterton was mixing freely in wider society, gaining the respect of many gifted people like Wilson Knight and Sir Archie Flower through his journalism and dramatic appreciation, and cooperating with professional actors and actresses in putting on a play in Torquay.

During the late twenties Joyce's anti-Semitic fantasies were developing apace. He showed an alarming propensity to make people honorary Jews when it suited him to do so and, as his biographer suggests: "From now on his political development was to consist broadly of the accumulation of what he considered evidence against Jewry and the sharpening of his polemical weapons to combat the chosen enemy."<sup>235</sup>

All this is in marked contrast to Chesterton's fair dealings with individual Jews and his close friendship with Joseph Leftwich during the 1930s. Finally there is the content of Joyce's Fascist ideology, which centred upon a biological categorisation of the Jews and a passionate conspiracy theory with almost demonic categorizations of the Jews' supposed powers. This, coupled with his fanatical zeal in pressing his case, made him a frightening figure - reminiscent of many of the leading Nazis whom he so admired. One who saw him speak in 1934 was Cecil Roberts:<sup>236</sup>

Over/.....

"Thin, pale, intense, he had not been speaking many minutes before we were electrified by this man. I have been a connoisseur of speech-making for a quarter of a century, but never before, in any country, had I met a personality so terrifying in its dynamic force, so vituperative, so vitriolic. The words poured from him in a corrosive spate...We listened in a kind of frozen hypnotism to this cold, stabbing voice. There was a gleam of Marat in his eyes, and his eloquence took on a Satanic ring...When the speaker finished, his white face luminous with hate, the chairman announced that questions might be asked. But no questions were asked. The audience sat paralysed by that flood of vituperation. I felt as if I had seen something unclean, so fearful in its cold frenzy that one blanched, asphyxiated in so nauseous an atmosphere...."

The acid test of Joyce's beliefs came with the advent of war in 1939. By going to Germany and becoming a Nazi propagandist Joyce demonstrated the vast gulf that separated his racist internationalism from Chesterton's deeply held nationalist inclinations. For Chesterton Fascism without nationalism was a meaningless concept. Joyce had no such inhibitions. This crucial difference explains why Chesterton ended up in the British Army and Joyce in a Berlin bunker.

This comparison of Chesterton with Mosley and Joyce indicates that the B.U.F. was a broad church in ideological terms. Beneath the shared commitment to building a non-sectarian movement which would place nation before ties of class, caste and coterie, and a common identification of 'the Jew' as the principal enemy of this goal, lay fundamental differences of emphasis which, under the impact of personality clashes and personal jealousies, reduced the initial spirit of comradeship to almost nothing. As Robert Skidelsky suggests: "The BUF was an expression of sociological optimism, not a response to sociological pressures...";\* but, by 1936 it had become the victim, in part, of its own internal sociological and ideological problems.

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\*"Fascism in Britain": In Fascism in Europe, (Ed. S.J. Woolf), Methuen, London, 1981, p267.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### MAN POSSESSED

"Why, at the present time, when Hitler and Mussolini lie buried with their concepts, with shattered countries as their monuments, and when Mosley lives in tentative retirement in the remote countryside, are...pains taken to resurrect the Fascist corpse?"

A.K. Chesterton: London Tidings, September 27th, 1947.

"Man, as Carlyle insisted, cannot live always upon the heights."

A.K. Chesterton: The Weekly Review, September 14th, 1944.

Although it was not part of the brief of this thesis to deal with Chesterton's post-Fascist beliefs, it remains important to undertake at least a brief survey of his thoughts and activities in the aftermath of his loss of faith in the Fascist solution. Since when an individual rejects a political orthodoxy and moves on to adopt another, his or her self-justificatory remarks often help greatly to illuminate the nature of their commitment to the original doctrine. In this respect Chesterton was certainly no exception and much can be learnt about his Fascist beliefs from his later writings.

In the fourteen month period between Chesterton leaving the B.U.F. and joining the British Army, he continued to contribute articles to various anti-Semitic, anti-war journals, most notably the New Pioneer and Free Press. Both journals carried in their columns a strange amalgam of superpatriotism, back to the land utopianism, Fascism and pro-Nazism; and both can be described as publications serving the political viewpoints of anti-Semites - Fascist and non-Fascist. Alienated from the pro-Nazi Fascists and isolated from his fellow radical Fascists, most of whom had elected either to remain within the B.U.F. or to retire from active politics completely, Chesterton was forced to associate with a motley crew of retired service chiefs, reactionary Conservatives, and dogeared aristocrats. The whole thing had an air of farce about it, as can be seen from the following report of a speech given by Chesterton at Purdy's Restaurant, in London, in December 1938. He was speaking at the launch of the first issue of Lord Lynton's anti-Semitic, anti-war broad-sheet, the New Pioneer:<sup>1</sup>

Over/.....

"Lord Lymington spoke of the necessity and urgency for physical and mental regeneration of the English people. Mr. A.K. Chesterton...reiterated Lord Lymington's sentiments, and, turning towards him, suggested that Lord Lymington was the man England needed as a 'national saviour', and that they looked to him for a lead. Lord Lymington, a shortish man with a mildly pugnacious expression, looked exceedingly uncomfortable..."

The advent of war saved Chesterton from further years of fruitless organizing. His first reaction to the clear threat of war with Germany was to register himself with the Officer's Emergency Reserve, and when war actually broke out he duly appeared before the War Office Selection Board. In spite of his previous affiliations (which he openly admitted) he was accepted as a commissioned officer and was posted to a unit of Western Command, stationed at Chester near Liverpool.

Membership of His Majesty's armed forces was, however, no guarantee of safety from arrest and imprisonment under the newly passed 18B Regulations, designed to protect the country against potential 'fifth-columnists' - mainly Fascists. By June 1940 (under Defence Regulation 18B (1A) ) no less than 747 members, former members and sympathisers, of the Mosley movement had been arrested and interned.<sup>2</sup>

Chesterton realised that he was under suspicion as an actual or potential traitor in the summer of 1939. His already bleak record cannot have been helped by the fact that, without his knowledge, the Nazis chose to broadcast one of his anti-war articles from the New Pioneer early in that year.<sup>3</sup> Thus, by the summer of that year both he and his wife were under close surveillance by M.I.5.:<sup>4</sup>

Over/.....



"A little man was placed beneath our window at Hampton Court, where we then lived, and there he stayed for months, keeping us in sight when we went for walks, and even on one occasion catching the bus in which my wife travelled every day and following her as far as the school in which she taught. Sometimes as he passed up and down he would carry an oar on his shoulder (our flat was within a stone's throw of the Thames) no doubt feeling that this served to conceal his purpose. One evening when we arrived back in the pouring rain, there he was at his usual station, soaked to the skin.

'Too bad', I said, speaking to him for the first time.

'Won't you come up to our flat and maintain your vigil out of the rain?'

His only response was a sickly grin."

Having obtained his Commission as an officer in the British Army Chesterton assumed that he had been cleared of the charge of traitorous intent. <sup>But,</sup> On a visit from Chester to his sister-in-law in Liverpool, he was arrested as a suspect spy and later his room was inspected by the police - except that it wasn't his room, but that of a fellow officer.<sup>5</sup> Upon learning of this Chesterton, outraged, wrote a strong protest to his commanding officer, stating that he had made no secret of his previous affiliations and had accepted his Commission in good faith. He asked for the 'blundering provincial Dogberries' to be removed from his trail so that he might contribute to the British war effort without fear or favour. If this was not possible he requested that his name be removed from the Army list:<sup>6</sup>

"My C.O. returned with this not very reassuring message: 'Tell Chesterton not to worry too much. His army record is clear and he has the complete confidence of his superior officers. It is only fair, however, to add that in view of his previous affiliations we cannot answer for what the civil arm may or may not do.'

Orders were evidently given for me to be treated with reserve. Secret documents which had come to me in the normal course of my duties as training officer were diverted. When pip-squeak subalterns, who had never heard a shot fired were discussing troop movements and suchlike matters my appearance would lead to nudges and the drying up of the conversation. I had the feeling of being in the Army but not of it - an appalling sensation and an impossible situation."

After several weeks of this social limbo he learned that M.I.5. had given him security clearance and absolved him of any further suspicion. The incidents left him unsettled and, when an opportunity arose, he volunteered for foreign active service in an unspecified region of the tropics, later revealed to be Northern Kenya. In his memoirs of the ensuing campaign Chesterton was candid about his motives for volunteering for active service overseas:<sup>7</sup>

"Why should I have elected to say farewell to my wife, who meant life and happiness to me, in exchange for a sterile wilderness which nearly twenty-five years before had robbed me of my youth and seriously undermined my health?

It would be gratifying to reply that I saw the opportunity of doing another real job of soldiering, and after only a brief hesitation sprang forward to seize it. I like to think that something of the sort took place, but one's motives are mixed and I cannot be sure...I do not shrink from the possibility that I may also have been influenced by a desire to leave England for a time in order to see her from a distance, readjust many of my ideas, and rid myself of a good deal of the irritation caused by a study of the conduct of her affairs during many years past. Bound up with this, I must confess, was doubtless an inclination to leave behind me what had threatened to become a personal hoodoo. For the truth is that I had been suspect by the authorities. I happen to believe both in Britain and in the social control of her destinies - that is, in the union of the imperial and socialist themes - but because it had been impossible to find this combination of creeds in orthodox parties, which seemed more concerned with the betrayal of both, I sought it elsewhere, among political heretics...Had my sense of humour been even more robust it might have enabled me to enjoy a situation wherein I, who had wanted Britain strongly armed and economically organized to take effective part in any struggle that might arise, should be hounded at the instance of men who had clamoured for war and at the same time taken care that we should lack every means with which to wage it, for all the world as though it were I who had been guilty of treason...Many sad and distressing weeks went by before I received official notice of the 'All-Clear', and even then I found difficulty in shaking off the depression caused by having been held suspect of treachery to the King whose uniform I wore. Among my motives in volunteering for Africa, therefore, was probably a fervent desire to lay this sinister ghost."

In fact Chesterton had been extraordinarily fortunate, for loyalty to the national cause had not prevented the arrest and imprisonment of many of his former Fascist colleagues. In fact

some were taken into custody while doing exactly the same thing as Chesterton - serving in the British Army. Indeed, apart from Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, whose position as the country's leading expert of tank battles protected him from arrest, Chesterton was the only senior member of the B.U.F. to remain in Britain and escape arrest. Why should Chesterton have been spared this final indignity, when so many insignificant Fascists and Fascist sympathisers were interned? Perhaps his letter refusing to go to Berlin as a propagandist was intercepted by the British secret service. There is also the fact that he criticised the Nazis for their attack on Czechoslovakia. Fuller may even have interceded on his behalf (but if so, why not for others in the same position?) Whatever the real cause of his good fortune, he certainly seems to have convinced the British secret service that he could be trusted to remain loyal to his country rather than his former creed.

After four false starts ("I felt that I could not endure yet another leave-taking of my wife, or hear my friends say yet again, as they wrung my hand and looked me in the eye: 'The very best of luck, old man.' ")<sup>8</sup> he was installed on board the Winchester Castle, bound for Capetown. Here he and his men transhipped on to the Khedive Ismail, a ship used in more settled times for carrying pilgrims to Mecca. On board Chesterton, now commander of the troop-deck, felt the unease of the radical returning. He was not at all enamoured at the vast difference in living conditions which existed between officers and other ranks on the ship:<sup>9</sup>

Over/.....

"...it always seems to me that dissimilarity of their living quarters is out of all true proportion, indeed, it harks back to the mediaeval world of privilege. An officer is superior only in his military function; why, then, should he often be better fed than his men? Why should the deck-space allotted to him be so immeasurably larger? Why should considerations of his comfort so often be allowed to dominate arrangements in allocating billets?"

Earlier, while still in the comparative comfort of the Winchester Castle, he had voiced his sentiments very strongly over a lecture given by a Signals Colonel on how to deal with "natives":<sup>10</sup>

"...!Never try to make a friend of a native', he blustered. 'If you promise him a beating, see that he gets it. But never try to make a friend of him. The native does not understand kindness'. This diatribe he interdispersed with the curious injunction - 'Always be gen'lemen, always be gen'lemen!' I thought of the houseboys, and mine-workers, and Zulu policeman who had been friends of my childhood days. I thought of the porters who had insisted on carrying me over the Livingstone Mountains when I cracked up with fever. I thought of the battle of Mount Kiliminjaro [sic.] in 1916, when the greatest difficulty was experienced in making the K.A.R. withdraw from Latima-Reata because their beloved Commanding officer, Colonel Graham, had been killed there and the men wished to stay and avenge his death...When the presiding officer asked for discussion I arose - 'white with passion' - they told me later. I admitted the irresponsibility of many Africans, and the difficulty of coping with many of their traits. But I also tried to express my horror of the perilous and pernicious doctrine which had just been preached - a doctrine all the more pernicious in that it was calculated to prejudice a host of young and inexperienced officers against men on whose loyalty their own lives would depend, and upon whose faithful shoulders rested the main burden of the defence of British Africa. My remarks were greeted with great enthusiasm, but the bonds among senior officers being what they are, the speech was not calculated to do me any good: the reverse."

Chesterton's colonialist paternalism is clearly evident in this outburst.

Militarily speaking Chesterton's war consisted of two phases. Initially he was involved with the push across Kenya through the desert of the Ogaden and into Somaliland. Afterwards he was sent down the coast to join the Somaliland Camel Corps. In both cases he was in charge of a motor transport Company and his experiences



Addis Ababa - 1941.

with the Camel Corps led him, shortly after the war, to write and publish a light-hearted novel entitled Juma the Great,<sup>11</sup> which also displays many of the paternalist attitudes he held towards the black African. Juma, the hero of the novel, is a tribal chief drafted into the British Army as a driver. The picture of this man which emerges from the pages of the novel is classically paternalistic. He is depicted as feckless, unruly, uncontrolled, unintelligent (although not slow-witted) and in need of constant supervision if disaster is not to ensue. At the same time he is depicted as faithful to his white superiors, a warm person, with a childlike affection. Overall the picture is affectionately drawn.

In 1943 Chesterton's health once again broke down in the sub-tropical conditions and he was invalided out of the Army with colitis and malaria. His alcoholism also returned when while recovering from his ailments in England a 'friendly' officer laced his soft-drink with spirits.<sup>12</sup> This led to his final cure from the affliction. (Ironically this was effected by a Jewish doctor who was a refugee from Nazi persecution).<sup>13</sup>

Returning to civilian life Chesterton plunged headlong into political writing. He began by writing articles for various anti-Semitic journals such as London Tidings, the People's Post and the Patriot. In 1944 the owner and editor of Truth (the long established journal of ultra-Right-wing Toryism) offered him a well paid position as his deputy editor and leader writer. Thus began what Mrs Chesterton recalls were "ten of the happiest years of our lives",<sup>14</sup> since he was receiving an excellent salary and led a fairly nine-to-five existence. The same can not be said for the Jewish community who continued to suffer from Chesterton's

accusations of conspiratorial intent in the columns of Truth, London Tidings and the Patriot. Indeed, during this period Chesterton's mind turned increasingly towards a complex form of conspiracy theory which brought together his anti-Semitism, anti-Communism and increasing fears for the dissolution of the British Empire, in an increasingly 'materialist' analysis of world events. Thus, the man who, as a Fascist, had little to say about economic affairs, or the works of conspiracy theorists, published a pamphlet in 1946 containing a complex analysis of the development of the world financial system during the previous hundred years, with a preface which suggested that the reader might care to check the 'facts' in the following works:<sup>15</sup>

"... 'All These Things' and 'The Truth About The Slump,' by A.N. Field; 'The Banker's Conspiracy' and 'A Fraudulent Standard,' by Arthur Kitson; 'Analysis of Usury' and 'The Modern Idolatry', by Jeffrey Mark; 'The Mystical Body of Christ and the Reorganization of Society,' by Father Denis Fahey; 'The Money Illusion,' by Professor Irving Fisher; 'The Two Nations' and 'The Breakdown of Money', by Christopher Hollis; 'Post-War Monetary Stabilization,' by Professor Gustav Cassel; 'America Conquers Britain,' by Ludwell Denny; 'The Brief For the Prosecution,' by Major C.H. Douglas.... Hansard covering the debate on the Loan Agreement... 'The Economics of Human Happiness,' by W. Collin Brooks...."

While in an article which appeared in London Tidings in the following year Chesterton wrote:<sup>16</sup>

"The blue-print for 'World Government by 1955', drawn up by ten British M.P.'s, and said to be supported by about a hundred others, leads me to break a self-imposed rule which hitherto I have always kept - the rule not to quote from that mysterious and evil document known as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion ... My refusal hitherto to quote from this source has been due to an unwillingness to be drawn into an argument about its authenticity... Whatever the explanation, the policy revealed in the Protocols is to-day being implemented in the most amazing - and terrifying fashion..."

From now on his energies were to be poured into what he saw as a crusade on behalf of the British Empire against the "World Movement for World Government".<sup>17</sup>

By the early 1950s Chesterton's conspiratorial model had reached a considerable degree of 'refinement' and his logical deductions on the increasing financial power of the United States in opposition to British interests produced pieces such as the following:<sup>18</sup>

"The point which has to be made, however, is that if it be Soviet policy to overthrow the West by force of arms rather than by subversion, the offensive would surely have been taken when there were no more than half a dozen battle-worthy divisions to stand athwart the path of the two-hundred Russian divisions massed behind the Elbe. Is it conceivable that the adroit strategists of the Soviet Union would wait for the building up of the Western strength before striking? Or are they such simple-minded fellows that the idea of being ringed about in time of war by American Atom-bomber bases appeals to the Russian Twilight in their souls?

The conclusion is inescapable that the Soviet menace is being used as part of an elaborate conspiracy to reduce the historic nations of Europe to economic impotence and political servitude, and to steal from them the fruits of their long and splendid labours overseas."

Such views managed to draw a letter from a correspondent who claimed to have discovered a dangerous crypto-Communist in the ranks of the far-Right in Britain.<sup>19</sup>

During this period Chesterton also collaborated with his old friend Joseph Leftwich on a book entitled The Tragedy of Anti-Semitism (published in 1948),<sup>20</sup> which was supposed to take the form of a debate. But as Chesterton's conspiracy mindedness and Leftwich's deeply religious orthodox Judaeism never really met in actual debate it is a profoundly flawed document on this level.

Chesterton's decade-long association with Truth ended in February 1953 when he left to take up the position of 'literary adviser' to Lord Beaverbrook, and journalist on the Daily and Sunday Express Group. During this time he 'ghost wrote' Beaverbrook's book Don't Trust to Luck<sup>21</sup> and various other works.



Working for Beaverbrook brought the quiet life of the Chestertons to an abrupt end. Chesterton found himself dragged, often at short notice, between Beaverbrook's three homes in London, Leatherhead, and Cap d' Ail near Monte Carlo; sometimes only to find his employer had already gone elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> During the writing of Don't Trust To Luck, Chesterton allowed his exasperation to surface:<sup>23</sup>

"It was a terrible book, which nevertheless received sychophantic reviews from the Beaverbrook papers. The trouble had been that whenever I expressed a thought in what I regarded as tolerable English, the Beaver found it intolerable, so that eventually I hit upon the device of parodying the style of the Daily Express leading articles. This went down extremely well.

My job this particular night was to write a chapter on 'Man Management'. Here, I thought was my opportunity. In the middle of the chapter I inserted a paragraph to the effect that anybody who had the power of patronage over a man's bread and butter, and who used that power to make the man the victim of his own caprice, committed an unforgivable sin.

Next morning I handed the chapter to Beaverbrook in his study at Cherkley. He took it to the board at which he worked, for some reason always standing, while I sat down to await the explosion.

When he came to page 5, in which the passage about capricious employers occurred, I said to myself 'Now for it.' Out came the Beaver's pencil followed by some heavy marking on the paper. He always stubbed rather than wrote. At the end of the chapter he handed the script book back to me, saying it would do. I looked at his insertion. It was a simple statement within brackets '(I commit this sin).' Thus was the chapter published.

I had to hand it to Beaverbrook. My defeat was absolute!"\*

Chesterton's association with Beaverbrook lasted less than a year. Early in 1954 Chesterton became so outraged at the change of

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\*The passage actually reads: "Where his power is over another man's bread, he must be at great pains never to do anything which detracts from that man's proper pride and stature. Otherwise, in my belief, he may commit a mortal sin. (I have committed this mortal sin.)" Don't Trust To Luck, Express Newspapers Limited, London, 1954, p93.

editorial line in his old journal Truth (it had recently been purchased by Ronald Staples, an orthodox Tory) that he obtained a list of subscribers and circulated amongst them a pamphlet entitled: Truth Has Been Murdered. This, in turn, prompted an eccentric ex-patriot millionaire from Chile, R.K. Jeffrey, to send Chesterton a cheque for £1,000, with which Chesterton started his own views-sheet Candour, the first issue of which appeared on October 30th, 1953.\* When Beaverbrook came to hear of this journal he instantly dismissed Chesterton, who left without malice, considering that: "Of the three authentic men of genius I have known, Beaverbrook was one."<sup>24</sup>

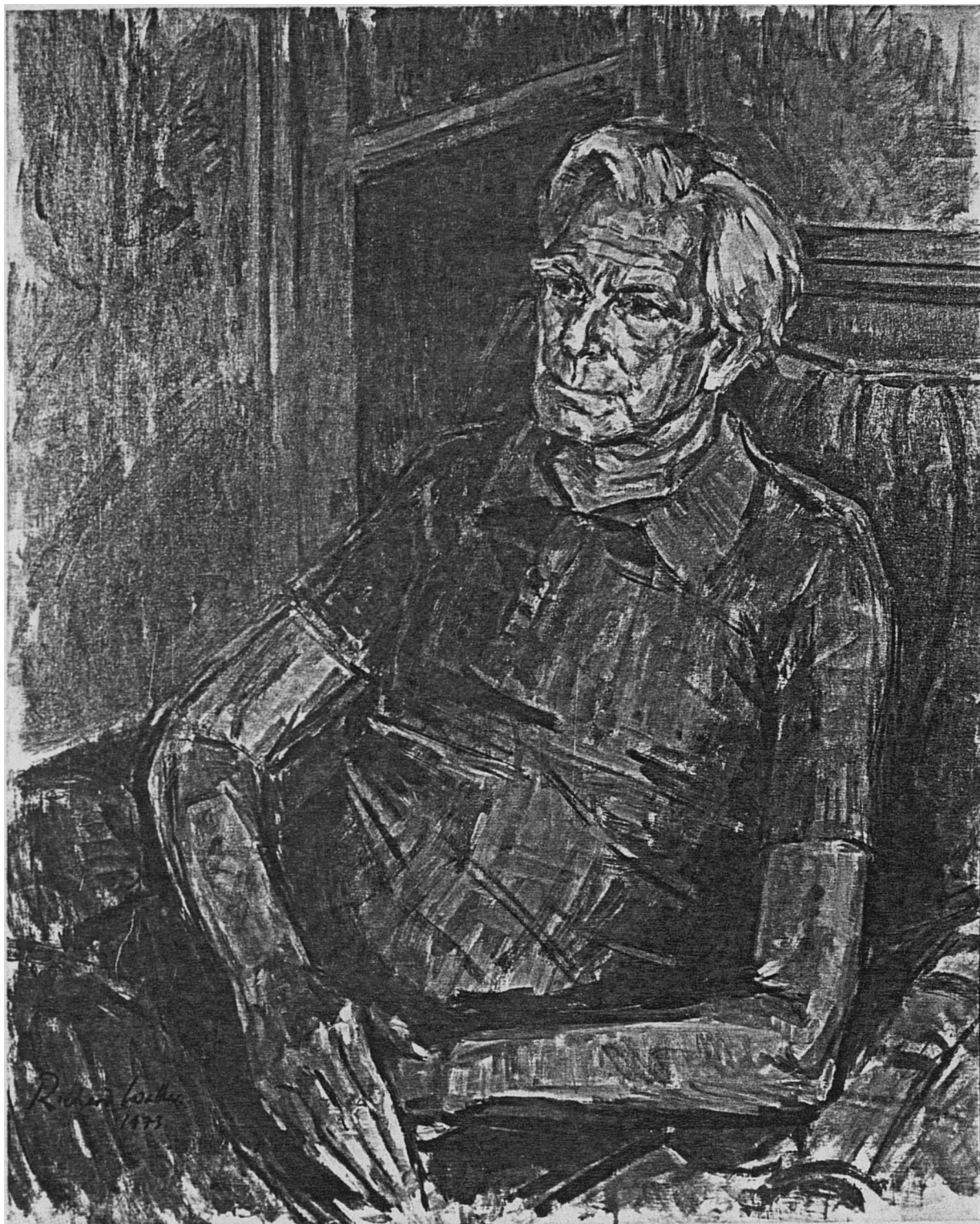
In 1954 Chesterton established his own political pressure group The League of Empire Loyalists, whose political stunts, especially in interrupting Tory Party Conferences with cries of "Save the Empire," and "Tory Traitors", were avidly followed by the national press. During this period Chesterton's anti-black prejudices were brought fully to the surface by the issue of coloured immigration and his attention was divided between conspiracy theorising and attacking the policy of allowing immigration by non-whites into Britain. The L.E.L. was in many ways the most important training ground for the next generation of British neo-Fascists and extreme loyalists. It contained

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\*The R.K. Jeffrey connection provided one of the most bizzare episodes in Chesterton's eventful life. While alive Jeffrey is reputed to have contributed sums totalling £70,000 to Chesterton's political funds. In 1959, this highly unusual man (reputed to live on a diet of porridge and walnuts and to keep a bathtub full of the latter against any possible world shortage which might occur) made a will which left Chesterton as the sole heir. When he died in 1961, it was alleged by a woman called Elba de Zencovic (and her lawyer husband) that 28 hours before his death he had changed the will in her favour, recognizing her as his natural daughter, and signing the new will with his thumb print. The lawyer also claimed that the original will had been lost on a bus journey. The legal dispute dragged on in the Chilean courts throughout the 1960s, only to end in defeat for Chesterton, after a great deal of money had been spent on the cause.

men like John Tyndall, Martin Webster, Colin Jordan and John Bean, who, after leaving Chesterton and indulging in the Nazi fantasy, returned (with the exception of Jordan) to provide the leadership of the National Front. Chesterton was the focal point of "respectability" around which these men circulated. After the Second World War Chesterton fought no less than fourteen successful libel actions against those individuals and newspapers unwise enough to insinuate that he had ever been a traitor, or anti-British.<sup>25</sup> His passionate anti-Nazism and Empire Loyalty made him acceptable to the extreme right wing of the Tory Party. He was, therefore, the natural choice for the first Chairman of the National Front (founded in 1967 with the merging of the L.E.L., the British National Party, the Greater Britain Movement, and the Racial Preservation Society). Never more than a figure-head in the N.F., since he was forced (for health reasons) to spend each winter in South Africa, Chesterton resigned from the movement in 1971, sickened by the violent street politics and pro-Nazism of the party. His L.E.L. followers followed him from the N.F. and loyally supported him for the remaining three years of his life, as he continued to publish his views in Candour. He died on 16th August 1973.

Chesterton's legacy today resides in his conspiracy theory. Apart from the huge volume of articles he wrote in Candour, he produced a book in 1967 called The New Unhappy Lords, which contains the fullest statement of the conspiracy accusation produced by any member of the British far-Right since the war.<sup>26</sup> The book has subsequently passed through several editions and continues to sell throughout the world. Chesterton also passed



A Portrait of Chesterton painted shortly  
before his death in 1973.

on his beliefs through personal contact with leading members of the far-Right. In 1971 John Tyndall declared that: "without hesitation", "what understanding I have of political affairs I owe much more to A.K. than to any other person."<sup>27</sup> Yet such links are of less importance than Chesterton's writings. For it is his extremely doubtful privilege to go down in modern history as the man most responsible for keeping alive, spreading, and developing the British tradition of conspiracy thinking. Thanks to his efforts the writings of conspiracy theorists of an earlier age (Nesta Webster, A.N. Field, Arthur Kitson and Father Denis Fahey, to name but a few) have found a more contemporary expression, and a wider public.

This all too brief examination of the latter half of Chesterton's life has, nevertheless, served its purpose in setting the scene for the main theme of this chapter, namely the attempt to complete our understanding of Chesterton's Fascist commitment by studying his reaction to the collapse of his faith in this transcendental creed, in the wake of the stark facts of Nazi imperialism and genocide.

The two years between Chesterton's break with Mosley and the onset of war with Germany were a period of bleak soul searching for Chesterton. The failure of the Mosley movement was bad enough, but Hitler's naked territorial aggrandisement in Czechoslovakia and Poland, followed much later by the irrefutable revelations of genocidal horror perpetrated by the Nazis, combined to completely undermine his confidence in Fascism as a truly nationalist and humanist creed.

Chesterton's mood of soul searching was never clearer than in a play he wrote in 1938-39. The play, aptly entitled

Man Possessed,<sup>28</sup> seems to have been written by him as a personal cathartic exercise (it was never published or performed). It is an attempt to trace through the shattered ruins of his past in the wake of his loss of faith in Fascism.

The hero of the play, one Vallance Wedstone, begins as a battle-weary Company Commander of an infantry section on the Western Front. The date is October 1918. After a mysterious tragedy which is not explained at the time, he reappears as a dramatist in the mythical town of Capleton-on-Sea, with his former army 'batman', Munch, now his house-servant. We are told that Wedstone is to stand for the local Council which "has been very corrupt for years." We are also informed that Wedstone has started work on a very "serious" play, putting his "deeper self" into it.

The full meaning of Man Possessed ( described by Chesterton in the preface as "A Drama of the Mind" and including the instruction with the character list that "several parts can be doubled" ) remains far from clear. In some ways this is what one would expect, given that Chesterton was, in many respects, too close to his own personal tragedy to clear up his deep confusion. Yet, in certain ways, the content of the play and the way Chesterton chose to review the events of his past adult life, are more interesting than the conclusions which may be drawn from the work.

Witness, for instance, the following exchange, which takes place in the trenches in 1918, between Wedstone (Chesterton) and the future Sir Thomas Atherton, a fellow officer:<sup>29</sup>

Over/.....

Atherton: "Dulce et decorum and all that - there's something in it, you know, even glory."

Wedstone: "Yes. I know what you mean. If men had not evolved some values outside themselves - outside their own egos at any rate - how human life would stink...I feel the same thing about the dead. To start out on life with high hopes and vaulting ambitions, and then - almost before a man has really begun - to end as an unutterable smell in some waterlogged hole. What an atrocious mockery of human pretension!"

Atherton: "But still...."

Wedstone: "Yes, I know that 'but still', and I agree with it. Man must be willing to preserve men's willingness to die a warrior's death, and at the same time to do away with occasions for its exercise - that is the problem. As it is you cannot imagine a more insane way of putting it right."

Atherton: "Putting it right?"

Wedstone: "Yes, I believe that in a misbegotten way we are doing precisely that - putting things right...among all this howling destruction I'm certain there is something even sane and wholesome. And that is why part of one remains cheerful."

Atherton: "What will you do after the war, Wed?"

Wedstone: "Well...I'm not like you - heir to a baronetcy and a fortune. Even so, I'll probably be able to reconcile the two - work and living, I mean. If I were an artist I'd paint on stupendous canvasses, if I were a musician I'd compose mighty symphonies in praise of the triumph of life which is to come. As it is, I'll wield a pen a bit and I'll write books, poems, plays, everything in my power. I'm bursting with ideas. So is the whole world. Don't you feel it? (Rises and walks about.) A world throbbing with the spirit of rebirth. After all this agony, a springtime of the mind unparalleled. We can never return to littleness."

Atherton: "You seem to me young beyond belief - terrifyingly young."

Wedstone: "That's what everybody used to tell me, even at school. But I know your arguments. They are the old arguments. In fact they are the pre-war arguments. About not changing human nature and the rest of it."

Atherton: "I was going to say, man's memory is short...You're in for some shocks."

Continued/.....

Wedstone: "I don't believe it. Think! Today we have an Empire sworn and dedicated. Millions and millions of men and women concentrating their efforts upon one single aim. The whole colossal effort animated by the promptings of the spirit. Yes, and consecrated by all the brave blood spilt. This cannot be forgotten. We are on the verge of a world-order incredibly finer than the old. We shall never again tolerate the dominance of organized greed and beastliness."

Atherton: "Your idealism is superb, old man, but you forget the infinite capacity of human affairs to go wrong."

Clearly, Chesterton is reviewing his youthful utopian idealism of the trenches, which brought him to believe that the war would actually change the world for the better. From what we already know of Chesterton's childhood, it is easy to imagine him in 1911, fresh in England, with his colonial visions of the nation and the Empire, being told that he was 'terrifyingly young'. From the vantage point of 1939, with his former political creed in ruins, and with the threat of another war with Germany, this catalogue of his former aspirations must have seemed especially poignant to him.

In another exchange which takes place between the two men, this time after the war, Chesterton reveals more of his earlier optimism and shows that his play is based on a later perspective of the events:<sup>30</sup>

Wedstone: "The position here is that the town has been very corrupt for years...We ought not to stand aloof. You remember our men, Tom! What dear fellows they were! Pure gold. But lost without leadership. And the trouble is that they mostly get such damned scoundrels to lead them in peacetime. That's where we ought to come in."

Atherton: "...But men in peace are different."

Wedstone:

Continued/.....



"I know, I know. It means that something has gone wrong with society. Do you remember once telling me your views about the infinite capacity of things to go wrong? Well, the mere fact of things going wrong suggests that they can also be made to go right. That is the theme of the play I'm working on. I'm trying to show that its not so much malice and down-right evil which wreck lives and relationships and even entire nations so much as maladjustments, and defects which can be mended if only we can discover how."

This is, of course, the theme of Man Possessed, and in order to understand what Chesterton means by "maladjustments" which destroy the fabric of society, it is necessary to take a closer look at the plot of the play.

In the opening scene (set in an Officers' mess dug-out on the Western Front, during the last days of the First World War) there is one character who is portrayed in a most unsympathetic manner. He is an officer named Jordan, who, we are told, has only just arrived from Base, and has managed to dodge his duty in the front line since he arrived by feigning an injured leg. He is described as "middle thirties, dark, thickset, repellent." (Not for Chesterton the subtleties of allowing the audience to draw their own conclusions about a character!) A discussion which takes place between other officers and men reveals that it is widely considered that Wedstone is intimidated by the mere presence of Jordan; there is even the suggestion by one man that Jordan might practice "black magic, or something."

Eventually a point is reached where Wedstone is forced to insist that Jordan goes out on an evening patrol. Jordan, very angry that his excuses will no longer suffice to keep him from such dangerous activities, turns on his Company Commander and snarls:<sup>31</sup>

Over/.....

Jordan: "I've always terrified you."

Wedstone: "I've known you for scarcely five days."

Jordan: "Much longer, Wedstone, if you only knew."

Wedstone: "(Uneasy) Don't try that mystical stuff with me...it's the sheerest blarney, called out here 'chancing your arm.' You're a little mad, I should think. What do you call yourself. Satanist, devil-worshipper, or what?"(Jordan smiles grimly).

Jordan: (Rising with deadly malice). "Very well, Wedstone, you win. But it is no matter for felicitations. You sneered at Satanism a moment ago, but it is a mistake to underestimate the vital forces of the universe. Look around you. (Burst of gunfire). There, for instance. What was that, the voice of Love? You fool! You fool! Do you really think the devil's barren of resources to twist and crush you, or keep you alive in order to harry the very soul out of you until you scream for death? I go now, but if anything should happen to me, if I should be killed, then by Christ you watch out for yourself. That is all I have to say to you - you swine."

The scene ends with the news that Jordan has been killed while leading his party on patrol, at which news Wedstone collapses in a dead faint.

The second scene shifts the action to the mid nineteen twenties. Wedstone, now a successful dramatist, living in Capelton-on-Sea, is planning to stand in the local elections. He is visited by his old friend Thomas Atherton (now Sir Thomas). Indeed, the whole town and environment seems full of former members of Wedstone's Company. His batman, Munch, is now his butler; the Company Cook, Farley, is the local Mayor; a former fellow officer, Cockran, is his agent and produces his plays for the stage; while another officer, MacIlrey, now an engineer, appears as Corkran's messenger to Wedstone. Two new characters appear in this scene, Pamela Rivers is Wedstone's girl, (in the purely Platonic sense; great stress is placed on this, probably because she is loosely styled on Doris Chesterton) and Wedstone 'Senior', Vallance's father, a local businessman and J.P. The latter, we are told,

"is a beast" who "made no attempt to understand him, or what it meant - out there."<sup>32</sup>

The bulk of the rest of the play is taken up with a series of libelous and insulting letters, written in Wedstone's hand, which are sent to the other main characters in the play. The process begins immediately after the war when Wedstone, serving with the Army of Occupation on the Rhine, (as Chesterton did) is told to expect his 'Majority'. Out of the blue, he receives a curt note from the Brigadier, packing him off home to England. It turns out that the Commanding Officer has received an insulting letter which appears to have been sent by Wedstone. Then, in the wake of a most favourable reception by the critics of his first play, a note, signed by him, is sent to each critic containing abusive accusations. Similarly, a friend and political ally receives a savage communication accusing him of gross corruption as Mayor. Abusive letters are also received by his producer, Atherton, his butler and even Pamela. The cumulative effect is to destroy his credibility, both personally and professionally.

In a moment of candour Wedstone confesses to a feeling of confusion:<sup>33</sup>

"I feel as though part of me were - not quite dead, perhaps, but captive. Captive to my own temperament, it may be, or possibly to some fatal chain of circumstances outside myself. I simply don't know. But you must have noticed something - something erratic about me...I don't know what to unburden even to myself. It seems at times like a kind of spiritual smoke-screen... My spirits rocket into the sky and then I forget the smoke-screen. But it's there all the same."

Stranger still, Wedstone is apparently unable to stay in company with anyone after 11. O'clock in the evening. After that time he always demands to be left alone.

At times it is as though we are being presented with an orthodox conspiracy theory. At one point Munch suggests that there is an air of conspiracy about the whole affair. To which Wedstone replies: "I don't know about conspiracy, Munch, old man, but I sometimes think the world's gone completely mad. Or perhaps it's just you and I who are!" On another occasion Wedstone remarks: "Remember that in a crazy world it does not do to rule out crazy explanations."\*

The plot moves on when, after bitter recriminations between Wedstone and some of his friends, Atherton calls in his friend Sir George Forrester, 'the brain specialist'. He arrives in the midst of a scene in which Wedstone's father is complaining about his son's behaviour.\*\* Sir George interrupts him with the following comment:<sup>34</sup>

"But of course you must realize, Mr. Wedstone, that when a man like your son - from all accounts a very brave and up-right fellow - when a man like that begins to carry out stupid anti-social acts he does not do so for the fun of things; clearly there is an element of compulsion."

After closely questioning Wedstone's friends, the doctor asks when Jordan, the sinister officer, was killed. It was August 12th, 1918. And the time? MacIlrey replies that the Patrol led by Jordan went out at 23.00 hours, so it must have been around 23.10 when he was killed. At this point Wedstone bursts into the room and, finding the company discussing him, suffers his final breakdown: "Why have I fought and striven and endured and suffered -

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\*As Billig writes: The believer in a conspiracy theory will consider that the world has taken some unusual turns... If the developments are seen as abnormal and even threatening... drastic effects might require drastic causes." See Chapter 6 above, p337.

\*\*At one point he attacks his son for: "strutting about as he did on his return from war and flaunting his decorations." These are almost certainly sentiments expressed by Chesterton's mother. Cf. "Testimony of the Aunts." Doris L. Chesterton.

only to be mocked by Hell's most pitiful ironies. Tell me doctor, tell me, what is this horror, this doom?"

The penultimate scene takes place in the ward of a mental asylum, which Wedstone believes to be a nursing home. Here a fascinating, if baffling, meeting takes place between our hero and another patient - Westonborough - who claims to be both a doctor and a patient. His opening gambit is to assert that he is a great admirer of Wedstone's plays. He also praises his novel and book of "pungent" essays. His next words are worth repeating in full:<sup>35</sup>

"You are destined to go far, Mr Wedstone, and to meet many more such people. I know, I share your vision - the vision you brought back from the war. I share it most ardently. And this is why I enjoyed your essays so wholeheartedly, especially your lascerating attack on so much of our contemporary art and literature. It is perfectly true that they do not offer violence - indeed, they offer outrage - to the values created by the generations of the Great War. And now you are here, a fellow patient. Well, well. Nothing serious, I trust? The world cannot afford the indisposition of men like you, Mr. Wedstone...Oh, let me warn you. I see Frolls and Delver sauntering along. Both charming fellows - but with definite psychosis, I fear. Do not let them alarm you, because they are not typical of our fellow patients."

There follows a distinctly odd exchange in which both men are shown to be quite mad. One solemnly declares that he spends his spare time pushing over billiard tables; the other, a former school teacher, relates a story about his having chosen to discipline a boy by cutting off his head! They leave and Wedstone asks his new friend whether the man actually did cut off the naughty child's head. Westonborough replies that it is most unlikely and that a better explanation would be a simple case of 'wish fulfilment'. He also declares that both men will be cured "beyond doubt they will."

There now follows a particularly bizarre exchange between Wedstone and Westonborough. The main interest lies in Westonborough's words:<sup>36</sup>

"As I have said, these two are the only people here in the slightest off their mental balance. You will find that you have many delightful companions - men of eminence in their own professions. And, although I cannot claim eminence for my-self, I look forward to the privilege of many a grand talk with you in the days to come. In particular I wish to tackle you about your attack on the Kantian definition of the soul. But it would be decidedly unfair to plunge you into a philosophical conversation on your first day. No I must go off and do my exercises. For phlebitis, you know. Or if you are feeling lonely and would not object and would like company, perhaps you will not object to my performing them here. [Wedstone agrees] (taking off his coat and shirt). That is very good of you. You know, I find Kant extraordinarily good on the soul.(Squats on the floor and begins vigorously to scratch himself like a monkey). Distressing ailment phlebitis."

Wedstone rises, horror struck, and rushes for the door. It is locked. "Oh God! I must get out of here!" he cries.

The significance of these incidents in the mental hospital are very hard to fathom out. At first one is tempted to recall G.K. Chesterton's words, that a madman has nothing left to lose but his reason. For, while Westonborough is clearly disturbed, he is presented as a man who recognizes Wedstone's talents, and retains a considerable degree of 'rational' consciousness. He also suggests that many other men of 'eminence' are in this position. On balance the most plausible explanation seems to be that Chesterton is attempting to show how otherwise capable people can be undermined by circumstances. This would explain why Westonborough is portrayed as sympathetic with Wedstone's views, as capable of recognizing clearly the psychosis of Frolls and Delver (although it is not clear why he should think that they will certainly be cured), and yet at the same time should be so obviously portrayed as mad. But what are these awful circumstances, capable of turning intelligent and 'delightful'

men and women into the institutionally insane? In part at least Chesterton seems to be returning to his personal preoccupation with 'decadence'. A decadent society will, in his opinion, produce decadent individuals, unable to express anything more than their own inner confusion. Hence Westonborough's defence of Kantian beliefs. Kant's attacks on conventional metaphysics, and on attempts to provide metaphysical knowledge of the soul, must have been anathema to Chesterton, imbued as he was with such ideals. As such he would consider Kantian rationalism as a product of a decadent society.

Yet the exact circumstances of Wedstone's decline into insanity remain unclear. After all he has not accepted the ideas of neo-Kantian rationalism. This is the subject of the play's conclusion.

The final scene is set in Sir George Forrester's office at the hospital. Wedstone's friends have been involved in the gathering of family and personal information for the doctor, who has then fed much of this to Wedstone in a disguised form so that his subconscious is aware of it, without disturbing his conscious mind. The time has now arrived for Sir George to confront his patient, at the very time of day he most dreads - shortly after 11.p.m. Consequently Wedstone has to be brought forcibly into the study.

The session begins with Sir George taking Wedstone through a traumatic incident which occurred in his childhood. Apparently, at the age of two he was chased by his older brother, Andrew, who was brandishing a knife. The incident terrified the child, who had since expunged it from his conscious mind. Soon afterwards

this mysterious older brother disappeared from the family - as if he were dead. Nothing more was said of him to Wedstone.

Wedstone is now asked whose death is associated in his mind with the time 11.10pm.? Suddenly aware that it is in fact 11.10., he rushes to the study door which is locked. He pleads with the doctor to be allowed to leave and persuades the doctor to at least put off the main light. In the semi-darkness (the doctor's desk lamp remains on) Wedstone's whole demeanour alters, his face, his mannerisms, his voice, all change into the form of Jordan, the dead officer!

Warning the doctor not to "dabble in things so perilous, or strive against forces so dangerously strong", he observes with self-satisfaction that Sir George is terrified of him. Sir George replies, coolly, that on the contrary it is he, Jordan, who is frightened:<sup>37</sup>

Jordan: "I terrified! (Laughs hideously.) Why, terror is the principle of my being and because of that it is impossible for me to know fear."

Sir G.: "You were not conspicuous for your gallantry as a soldier."

Jordan: "You forget that was before that mystic hour upon which you harp so much - eleven-ten...But now I am wholly absorbed in my ancient principle. I am as old as it is, and as imperishable."

Sir G.: "I too have a principle."

Jordan: (cackles.) "I know what you are going to say - Love! Love!" (Sneering.)

Sir G.: "Some would call it love. But as I am a doctor I'll call it simply - the white magic of healing."

Jordan, in spite of having announced his intention to murder the doctor immediately, is sufficiently sure of himself to be persuaded to discuss his interest in evil forces:

Over/.....



Jordan: "With the greatest delight there's nothing I enjoy more. Now let me tell you about this terror - principle - call it the spirit of evil if you like...I think my interest in it first became focused, as it were, when in my late 'teens I read a book about anti-Christ. Black magic, you know. I made myself his votary. And I've been a staunch follower ever since."

Sir G.: "Mainly, I suppose, by trying to inspire people with terror ...What sort of people did you select?"

Jordan: "Very young children as a rule, infants. You should see their faces confronted with a butcher's knife - an ecstatic sight. I tried it on my younger brother, first."

He goes on to tell Sir George that he would actually have killed his infant victims if he had not remained a coward at the time. He also admits that he engaged in financial swindling with the help of his father, laying the real basis of the family fortune. As this is supposed to account for Jordan's/Andrew's disappearance from the Wedstone family (he was sent away to 'lie low') it is increasingly apparent that Chesterton is little interested in realism in the plot of this play.

The crisis point is quickly reached as Jordan rounds off his catalogue of terror and hatred with the chilling words that:

"...even if I had no weapon, it would make no difference. The power to which I belong can and does set entire nations by the throat."

He raises his knife to kill the doctor, but Sir George stops him short by asking him why he is afraid to mention that he changed his name in the wake of the financial swindle. After some hesitation and evasion, Jordan admits that his real name is Andrew Wedstone. Sir George rises, in triumph, and declares: <sup>38</sup>

Over/.....

Sir G: "The last contact made...It's no use you posturing with that knife. You've lost the power to use it. Grimace if you will, but you no longer have the power even to speak. You never were more than a shoddy little pervert, even in life. Since that you've existed merely because you managed to get a foothold in a nobler mind than your own - your brother's. Even then you were no more than a whiff of mental disease. In two seconds you will be sheer nothingness - annihilated!".(The figure, grimacing horribly, steps back into the darkness. The next instant - light. But it is Val standing at the switch. He comes bounding forward.)

Wedstone: "Oh, Doctor! You are the greatest man in the world. How you managed to do it beats me."

Sir G: "It was not that mysterious. Nine-tenths of your cure was performed by your friends investigating your family history. That, combined with our talks, of course."

Wedstone: "I say, what a family history, Doctor."\*

Sir G.: "I don't know, Val. Something just went wrong with them, as with you."

Wedstone: (Excited)"Went wrong and therefore could have been put right. Just as you have put me right. Oh, Doctor, you've confirmed in my own case the main contention of my play, and the most passionate belief of my life - that the world can be mended. But finally, doctor - you said that the talks and investigations made up nine-tenths of the mystery. What of the tenth part?"

Sir G.: "In every ultimate human situation, Val, there is a tenth part which is not resolvable by any known logic. Call it what you will. To me it is the divine power of God to animate and heal. This power does indeed work miracles."

So ends this strange play.

But what are we to make of this strange mix of themes?

Chesterton's avowed aim is to show "that it's not so much malice and downright evil which wreck lives and relationships and even entire nations, so much as maladjustments, and defects which can be mended if only we discover how." And yet, the play is literally infused with a sense of evil. It is the evil brother who causes the downfall of the 'nobler mind' of Wedstone, and not some inherent defect in Wedstone's character. The evil is external

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\*This line is obviously incorrect and not corrected on proof reading.

and in the world. In this, and for the first time in his writings, Chesterton gives notice of his belief in the power of supernatural forces of evil. Jordan is a votary of these powers, and represents, therefore, an existential power of evil in the human world.

Doris Chesterton has best expressed this side of her husband's beliefs:<sup>39</sup>

"He felt that to savour 'Macbeth' you must accept belief in the supernatural. Evil powers exist outside a man. Given the chance by a fault in a potentially good character these may enter into and destroy a man...In Macbeth he always rejected the Freudian interpretation that the evil was all in Macbeth's mind. He was much more attracted towards Jungian psychology with its analysis of power."

The play is almost certainly an attempt by Chesterton to stubbornly assert his optimism against the collapse of his faith in Fascism. Faced with the prospect of war with National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy, a war which he saw as playing into the hands of the Jews, he seems to be trying to reaffirm his faith that, given self-knowledge of the state of affairs in the world, the true picture of the intentions of the power of 'evil', the world can be 'mended'.

This is more than a simple attack on the Jews. Mention of the 'anti-Christ' is proof that this was part of Chesterton's vision of the evil in the world. But Jordan is Wedstone's brother and it is he who is the chief figure and incarnation of evil in the play. Part of the answer to this must lie in the fact that at this time Chesterton was becoming increasingly aware (as I shall demonstrate below) of the suicidal, indeed Satanic, side of Nazi irrationalism. Considering that the Nazi leadership had gone beserk in its drive for war, and, no doubt, remembering the failure of the Mosley Movement, Chesterton was assailed by

the truth of the inherently evil forces at work within his own creed. In this play he seems to be struggling to base his values, once again, on the experiences of the First World-War, to return to basic principles, to cleanse his beliefs of the evil forces which he now saw as having attached themselves to his original vision.

Ultimately Chesterton's play remains at best confused and at worst totally obscure. It is never really clear where the real seat of evil lies - is it inherent in all men, or a purely external force acting upon them? The confusion of the play would seem to mirror Chesterton's own confusion at the time. One thing is clear, however. The play is bathed in horror for the uncommitted reader, in spite of Chesterton's seeming intention to write an optimistic play. The reason for this lies largely in the overwhelming sense of evil in the work. The play is so contaminated with a sense of evil that it is impossible to share Chesterton's final optimism over its defeat. Everything is presented in such black and white terms. Thus, the doctor, supposedly a representative of the power of 'Love', abuses the vanquished human essence of evil, Jordan, calling him "a shoddy little pervert" and "a whiff of mental disease." There is little here of the Christian morality of loving thy enemy - no sense in which Chesterton could recognize the dialectical relationship between good and evil in the world. Those individuals infected (this seems a particularly apt metaphor to use) with evil, like Westonborough, in spite of their obvious goodness, display the most hideous traits in themselves.

Chesterton may have been a poor playwright (as he undoubtedly was) but this is not why the play fails to elicit sympathy from

an uncommitted reader. Rather, the failure to convince lies in the crude portrayal of the forces of good and evil in the work. This is a factor of great importance in understanding Chesterton, for this, above all else, does seem to suggest that there are psychological undercurrents, certain personality traits, involved in his move to Fascism. For in Man Possessed Chesterton displays an inability to cope with the full complexity of good and evil. For him they are mutually exclusive properties, and are posited as existing in the world as almost pure essences. This caused Chesterton to divide the world into black and white, good and evil, right and wrong. Hence his receptiveness to the crude claims of the conspiracy theory and anti-Semitism. This also explains why, once he had become convinced of the truth of the conspiracy accusation, nothing, not even his realization of the horrors of Nazism, could shake his belief in this respect. In all this one is reminded of Billig's suggestion that conspiracy minded individuals assume that actions have occurred because of the characters of the actors involved.<sup>40\*</sup>

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\*Chesterton was not the only Fascist to speculate on the meaning of evil in the wake of the British Fascist experiment. Reflecting on Mosley's prison reading in the early 1940s, Robert Skidelsky writes: "Mosley's struggle to overcome Nietzsche...hinged on the search for an intelligible theory of evil. For Mosley, life had meaning only if evil had meaning, since evil was so much the most important factor in his world. The only rational answer was that evil had a function, was an agent of the good, was what stirred men into activity. Discussion of evil illuminated many different problems for Mosley, personal and political: the problem of his own actions, the problem of fascism, the problem of evil (as he saw it) which others had inflicted on him, the problem of social catastrophes like war and depression. In each he sought to discover a meaning which would better enable him to live with himself and go on 'striving' for a better world." Cf. "Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism.", in K. Lunn and R.C. Thurlow (eds) British Fascism, Croom Helm, London, 1980, p97. From this Mosley appears to have been much more successful in dealing with the relationship between evil and good than Chesterton.

It still remains to look at Chesterton's reaction to Nazi aggression and brutality in Europe. Prior to Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia, he had continued to offer at least tacit support for the Nazi regime. The previous annexation, that of Austria, had fallen within his definition of the reclamation of a culturally and historically sanctioned part of the German Reich. Czechoslovakia was, however, another matter. Even before this momentous event he had begun to move away from associating British with German or Italian totalitarianism. Thus, in December 1938 he wrote:<sup>41</sup>

"Mussolini builds a new Italy upon Imperial Rome. Hitler builds a new Germany upon the old Pan-Germanism. Upon what foundation shall the new Britain be built? Assuredly [not] upon the steel and iron symbolism of Fascist movements abroad...Those who threaten to let loose this upon the kindly inhabitants of Britain would merit destruction were it not certain that they first destroy their own cause through their fantastic incompetence."

He goes on to suggest that the only sane foundation for Fascism in Britain would be through the agency of "quiet unassuming fact-men" (a Spenglerian concept) upon the "foundation of Merrie England." Yet still he gave the Nazis the benefit of the doubt, suggesting that their excesses against dissident elements were the result of the need to defend hard won gains against internal and external subversion.

But the invasion of Czechoslovakia was just too blatantly imperialistic for him to stomach; an unprovoked attack on the sovereignty of a historically sanctioned nation-race culture, independent of the German nation-race and therefore entitled to national self-determination, preferably under its own Fascist regime. Faced with the stark fact of Hitler's territorial ambitions, Chesterton asked the editor of the Weekly Review (G.K. Chesterton's old viewsheet) for space to comment on this

naked act of aggression against a sovereign people, and here he poured out his anguish at this betrayal of his ideals by those whom he had once considered his intellectual and political allies:<sup>42</sup>

"Herr Hitler has given those who were friends to the Third Reich a blow straight between the eyes, leaving most of us not only barren of excuses for the latest coup, but without even the desire to look for excuses. It is possible to laugh at people who affirm that the fairy prince is a dragon in disguise, but when the prince casts off the habiliments of his fairy kingdom and appears before us scaled and snorting the laughter loses something of its spontaneity.

The only defence that has been put forward on Germany's behalf in this country comes from the usual Fascist quarter, which has a gift for defending things which may fairly be called indefensible. The argument here is that since Czechoslovakia was in a state of disintegration Herr Hitler had every right to step in and proclaim the Pax Germanica. It so happens, however, that people who argue in this fashion never grow weary of asserting that Britain herself is crumbling into disintegration, so that if they follow their line of thought to its logical conclusion they would have no complaint if Herr Hitler, acting out of his great benevolence, were to send a "Protector" to take away our wireless-sets and make us generally happy and gemuthlich in the good old Prussian way.

Now I am not following the argument of the Left sentimentalists and weeping crocodile tears over the Czechs. I have no doubt whatever that the ferment of the strange new plutocratic-communist alliance that we have seen at work in Spain and elsewhere was inducing in the Czech people the familiar cosmopolitan mob mentality that spells death to the soul of the nation, but I do insist that it is a reflection both upon Herr Hitler's statesman-like qualities and upon his personal temperament that he did not find a solution to the problem within the orbit of Czech nationhood. The Czechs might well have produced a Franco had the German Fuehrer not elected to fill the role himself, which he has done, not as a liberator with an eye on their needs, one regrets to say, but as a brigand with an appraising eye upon their property and cash.

It does not help matters to argue that what Germany has done in South-Eastern Europe we ourselves have done over the greater part of the world. More than mere casuistry marks the distinction between colonial possessions and the annexation of a European state, and the whole point of the admiration of those of us that did admire Hitler was that we saw in him an exponent, not of the old nationalism which expressed itself as imperialist exploitation, but of the new nationalism which was to seek its achievements only in the domain of social and economic justice."

"We applauded when he grappled with the Money-Power, insulated the German economy against the depredations of international finance, and obliged capital to become the servant of the nation. We were delighted when he made a move towards equating German currency with German productive capacity, and when he arranged for every square yard of soil to yield its quota of sustenance in what we believed to be the only war under contemplation - the war against poverty. We admired his 'Beauty of Work' campaign, calculated to revive the superb pride of craft which furnishes man with one of the chief justifications for his existence. We were enthusiastic about work to place the amenities of modern life within the reach of the hitherto oppressed masses. We welcomed his organization of the Reich as a classless society, because it seemed to offer the world the basis of an honourable alternative both to communism and to monopoly capitalism, and we went on to explain to our friends that his drastic regimentation of private lives was a typical German method of protecting the regime against sabotage from within, just as armed might was necessary to prevent sabotage from without.

When our friends reminded us that, whenever the Germans had got together a great army in the past they had invariably succumbed to the temptation to make it march, we replied that this might have been true of a weak man like the Kaiser, but that emphatically it was not true of Herr Hitler! And now, how utterly we have been belied!

The army has marched, and marched not only across Czech frontiers: it has barged through every honourable undertaking of its leader, and through every possibility of European appeasement during the leader's lifetime, since he has destroyed the only foundation upon which peace could be built - the security of his own word.

The chief point for us to remember, however, is that the states which call themselves, most emphatically, 'the great democracies' have no cause whatever to preen themselves upon any hypothetical superior virtue. Since either financially or territorially they own pretty well the entire globe, their declarations that they abide by the rule of law is calculated to impress only the most cretinous of their supporters.

And there is the difference between them and the National Socialist regime. When the Fuehrer puts on his Prussian jack-boots and squelches through Czechoslovakia, there is no doubt that there lurks at the back of his mind the crazy and misbegotten notion that in some way he is serving the best interests of his people, whereas the financial lords of the West who have turned their great empires into slums can plead no cause more altruistic than their own pocket.

If we must fight again - and Herr Hitler's proclamation to the Czechs frankly acknowledges might as the supreme arbiter of human destiny - then this time let us make quite sure that we fight to liberate England, not from the menace of German Guns alone, but from that still more devastating and frightful thing, the menace of cosmopolitan gold."



This piece betrays all the ambivalence characteristic of Chesterton's loss of faith in Fascism. On the one hand a rejection of Nazi armed aggression and Imperialism; on the other a continuing rejection of 'democracy' and finance capitalism. In another article Chesterton wrote of the delight of "both Jews and certain obsessed anti-Jews over here by the annexation of Czechoslovakia."<sup>43</sup> He remained convinced that the Nazi leadership would never contemplate attacking Britain.<sup>44</sup> But he could no longer restrain himself from attacking what he saw as the "grinning buffooneries of Dr. Joseph Goebbels."<sup>45</sup> Yet his attacks on the Jews continued unabated. A Jewish Chronicle reporter who attended a Free Press meeting in June 1939 wrote that:<sup>46</sup>

"...the wildest speech was made by A.K. Chesterton, who gave his delighted audience - mainly middle class - full value for their money by speaking (in Oxford tones) of 'greasy little Jew-boy pornographers'...."

Chesterton's hysterical attempts to 'educate' his fellow Britons to understand that the war with Hitler would only strengthen the 'Money-Power' of monopoly capitalists and Jews, while at the same time castigating his former Fascist allies for continuing to excuse Nazi aggression, placed him in an increasingly marginal position in an already highly marginal sector of the political arena.

The advent of war, followed later by the staggering revelations of Hitler's genocide programme against the Jews, slavic peoples and gipsies, left Chesterton devastated. He wrote to his Jewish friend, Joseph Leftwich that:<sup>47</sup>

"The unutterable abominations of Buchenwald and elsewhere completely knocked me flat and filled me with such horror that I began to doubt whether human affairs were not too far gone in depravity for anybody to do anything about them."

He even admitted that the event which hitherto had seemed to him "the bloodiest, most murderous affair in modern times", the Russian Revolution, could not match "the horrors of the gas chambers...instituted by a Germany gone beserk in war."<sup>48</sup>

He refused, however, to accept that Nazism carried within its racist ideology the absolute need to institute a programme of genocide against the Jews, preferring the comfortable fiction that a few Nazi leaders, crazed by the power they possessed and the war they were waging, were responsible for the manic brutality of the 'Final Solution'. Thus he wrote in 1947 that:<sup>49</sup>

"Large numbers of them (ordinary German Patriots) became National Socialists, and the more energetic undertook active work for the N.S.D.A.P.. This did not mean that they went around putting people into concentration camps or beating up Jews (while degradations were heaped upon the Jews, few were subjected to physical violence until the German leadership went berserk towards the end of the war, by which time every able-bodied National Socialist was in the battle-line)... The depraved criminal lunatics who in their frenzied derangement ordered the use of gas-chambers and torture-chambers, and others who practiced unauthorised barbarities, go to the gallows without petitions for mercy from me: their departure is the one good service they perform for the world which at least is made cleaner by their absense. Those others who carried out loathsome deeds at the insistence of higher authority, with their own lives held forfeit if they refused, seem to me to belong to a different category. Soldiers do not question the validity of their orders. It is easy for the poets and literary hacks of Bloomsbury to screech their delight when such unhappy creatures are executed, but the rest of us, remembering that we have not ourselves been confronted with so terrible a choice, will probably be content not to judge...I cannot persuade myself that justice is served when fallible mortals are punished for their political beliefs, especially where those beliefs were held many years ago, before those who possessed them could see into what fierce hells of insanity their country would be led."

Thus did he separate the 'good' from the 'bad' Nazis; the Hitlers - "the fate of frankenstein is not rare in this world, as Adolf Hitler himself discovered"<sup>50</sup>, from the true National Socialists in Germany.

Nonetheless, the combination of the Mosley Movement's internal

disagreements, and war and genocide perpetrated by the Nazis, did finally undermine Chesterton's faith in the political creed of Fascism. He could no longer accept the semi-mystic belief in the infallibility of the 'Leader'. Speaking of William Joyce's absolute faith in Hitler he said: "It was the old, old story of ideologues the world over. The fuehrer, Duce, the Leader - call him what you will - can do no wrong. It is always 'those about him' who are to blame."<sup>51</sup> Gone also was the vision of the 'good society' so typical of his Fascist writings:<sup>52</sup>

"Hitler and Gandhi if they cannot be compared, can at least be contrasted, for whereas Hitler held that the end justified the means, Gandhi must obviously have persuaded himself that the means could shape the end. Both notions are aspects of the one cardinal political error - the error of supposing that the constantly shifting kaleidoscope of human affairs will ever allow a political end to be precisely predetermined or thereafter permanently fixed..As...the people are as little aware of the workings of cause and effect as the be-blinkered idealists who aspire to lead them, it becomes possible for a man to be worshipped as a God - Gandhi, Hitler, Stalin, Ataturk, Mussolini, even the war-time Churchill - whereas the totality of that man's policy be such that the more suitable method of dealing with him would be to lock him up as a public menace."

It was clear to Chesterton that the Mosley Movement had proved incapable of creating the 'classless' brotherhood within its own ranks. There was, of course, the simple problem of personality clashes, which must have added to the growing split between the ideologists of the Movement and the Party administrators. But Chesterton also considered that the B.U.F. had failed to achieve the integration of the almost exclusively upper-middle class leadership with the lower middle-class and working class rank and file of the Movement. A brief glimpse of this can be seen from the following extract of a letter sent by Chesterton to John Bean (the leader of the British National Party) during the negotiations over the founding of the National Front

in 1966:<sup>53</sup>

"You also have, what we do not have to any extent, an appeal to the working classes, which seemed to us another good reason for a merger. It is not always easy to achieve a blending of different elements in the community - it was a very real difficulty in the pre-war B.U.F....."

So much for the 'spiritual communion' of all Fascists within the Movement.

There was also the equally stark fact that Fascism had singularly failed to capture the attention, let alone the support, of the mass of British people. Writing in 1947 about Mosley and his movement Chesterton stated that:<sup>54</sup>

"The Fascist edifice which he...constructed was about as stable as a house built of cards. Its organization was a joke...Outside East London, there was no branch which had an active membership of more than a few dozen high-spirited young men, and few of the branches, even in the large cities, had as many as a dozen. During the London demonstrations parade figures of many thousands of marchers were proudly published in the Fascist paper, but no impartial observer ever counted more than fifteen hundred, and this despite the fact that coaches were used to bring in supporters from all over the country to give the impression of mass support. Outside East London, again, Fascists who stood for election to local councils polled on average, about 25 votes apiece. What did lend colour to the suggestion that Mosley was leading a great mass movement were the packed meetings he addressed. The explanation was that when he spoke, say, in Lewisham, adulating followers from every part of London and the Home Counties would rush to hear him and if he spoke the next week at Hackney or Ealing there would be the same rush by the same people. Mosley was thereby completely deceived as to the real strength of his movement, for he believed from the applause that he had converted the inhabitants of each district which he visited\*. Why, then, did Mosley appear to be marching to the sound of thunder during the six years before the war? The answer is simple - nine-tenths of the thunder was provided by his enemies. Had they not counter-demonstrated in thousands - on one occasion in hundreds of thousands - his marches would have been about as spectacular and exciting as the progress of a troop of bedraggled Boy Scouts on a rainy day."

Additionally, Chesterton was faced with the fact that some of his former Fascist associates, most notably William Joyce,

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\*Chesterton is almost certainly wrong in thinking that Mosley would have been deceived by this practice.

held their anti-Semitic beliefs independently of their nationalism. This revelation was a shattering blow to Chesterton's faith in the absolute indivisibility of these two tenets of the Fascist faith. Pressed on this point by Joseph Leftwich he made the following angry observations:<sup>55</sup>

"You ask me what English qualities went into the making of Houston Chamberlain, of young Amery, of Hewitt, and of William Joyce. How does one answer a question of this kind? What Jewish qualities went into the making of Trebitch Lincoln; or any Jew who went off the rails? All I have gathered about Houston Chamberlain from attempting to read his books is that he was mad...The only man of those you mention whom I know is William Joyce, whose lucidity of mind and whose fervent British patriotism ten years ago earned my respect. You may well imagine my shock when first I heard his voice over the German radio. Either his earlier views had been feigned, which I am sure they were not, or he had allowed anti-Semitism to swamp his reason. Such of these men as were Englishmen did their country abominable wrong, however pure or impure their personal motives may have been...If you expect me to excuse treason because of its anti-Semitic motive you will be disappointed."

In 1945 a meeting of Fascists and ex-Fascists took place in London to discuss the setting up of an anti-Semitic organization to be called - prophetically - the National Front. Although these deliberations came to nothing, Chesterton's role in them is most interesting. Unbeknown to the assembled company (which included Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, and Colin Brooks - founder of Aims of Industry) the meeting was also attended by a member of the Jewish defence agency, whose subsequent report is now lodged in the archives of the Wiener Library. At one point a communication from Arnold Leese's pro-Nazi Imperial Fascist League was read out, suggesting preparations for an armed uprising, the reaction to which was reported in the following terms:"This was turned down. Chesterton said he wouldn't agree. Said he considered Joyce a traitor."<sup>56</sup> It is significant that the document singles out Chesterton as the dissenting voice

at the gathering, adding his remark about Joyce. Later in the document there is a remark on the fact that one member of the group, Sercold Skeels, a pro-Nazi, "is looked on with disfavour, He (sic.) seems a rabid and unbalanced anti-Semite."

Chesterton's estrangement from the post-war Mosleyite groupings was total. At a meeting of the 18b Detainees (British) Aid Fund (a Mosleyite faction) an infiltrator recorded the following remark made by a Mr. Valeriani, a former B.U.F. member:<sup>57</sup>

"Valeriani referred to AK Chesterton [sic.] appointment as assistant editor of 'Truth', and said Mosley had paid a lot of money for special mediacl [sic.] attention to AKC im [sic.] Germany, and they hoped they would get a return for their money."

This is a reference to Chesterton's visit to Germany in 1936-37. Yet Chesterton not only rejected his Fascist past with Mosley, but also rejected Mosley's route out of the Fascist ghetto. The following piece, written in 1947, stands as the epitaph for Chesterton's Fascist past and his relationship with Mosley, in a post-war world changed out of all recognition by Hitler's holocaust:<sup>58</sup>

"Fascism, he [Mosley] asserts, was too narrowly nationalistic. He will not repeat that mistake. He will, instead, unite Europe and exploit Africa, that he may succeed where Fascism failed. 'Hail Mosley!' shout his followers in ecstatic agreement. Fascism certainly failed. It failed so disastrously [that] it is impossible even to mention the word without invoking, not what its adherents meant when they used it, but what its deadliest enemies intended people to believe it to have meant. And that is defeat indeed! In the inter-war period, when mankind was menaced by militant Communism and made desperate by the rampages of international finance, which swung the world helplessly between glut and scarcity, there was nothing in my view sheerly unreasonable in the original Fascist case. It has only been made to appear unreasonable because National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy turned lunatic, preferring military glory to ordered tranquility and thereby furthered the cause of their own destruction. Because of their excesses - the German

Continued/.....

"excesses against the Jews, in particular - these regimes invested Fascism with so rank an odour that even such sanity as it contained is now held suspect. Not the least sane of its concepts was that which insisted that internationalism must always be a racket run by the world's only international people...How thoroughly in keeping with the hapless Mosley's temperament it is that he should seek to return to political life without the least hope of ever being able to escape the odium, whether deserved or undeserved, of his Fascist past, and yet having divested his political stock-in-trade of the one part of the Fascist argument which was demonstrably true!"

Chesterton's absolute commitment to nationalism and sincere belief in conspiratorial anti-Semitism, removed any chance of a rapprochement between the two men.

As a postscript to this discussion of Chesterton's move from Fascist transcendentalism to a more materialist philosophy of conspiratorial racial-nationalism, it is necessary to look at one final document - a play published by Chesterton in 1944, entitled No Shelter For Morrison.<sup>59</sup> For this work displays the transition in Chesterton's belief from Fascist to post-Fascist thinking, in which he shed his utopian vision of the 'good society', retaining his cultural nationalism and conspiratorial anti-Semitism.

The play is centred on the imaginary proceedings of a committee of enquiry sitting in a 'Hospital for the Politically Deranged'. It has been convened to examine the claims to sanity of a number of inter-war politicians. Significantly these are all thinly disguised Labour Party notables. Men like 'Herbert Hackney, M.P. for Morrisham', 'Mr Clement Limehouse, Member for Atleigh-under-Cloud', and 'Dr Woad' a member of the Brains Trust. The Chairman of the committee - 'Chief National Commissioner In Political Lunacy' - is, of course, Chesterton himself.

The two most striking features of this play are the attack on Labour Party policy in the inter-war period and the contrary support shown towards the record of the Tory Party. During his Fascist period Chesterton, although hostile towards the leaders of all the 'Old Gang' political parties, was perhaps most scathing towards the Conservatives. Yet in this play it is the Labour Party which is seen as principally to blame for the failure of Britain to either preserve the peace in Europe, or to rearm against a possible German threat. (Here Chesterton conveniently ignores the fact that he too propagandised against the need to declare war on Germany.)

To begin with Chesterton attempts to associate Socialism with the hated doctrines of economic liberalism, whilst distancing Toryism from this tainted tradition. Mr. Limehouse is under examination and the Chairman suggests to him that the Liberal Party is the party of international banking interests:<sup>60</sup>

Mr. Limehouse: "Not more so than the Conservative Party."

Chairman: "Come, come! Would you say that the free movement of goods and capital across national frontiers was a classic Tory doctrine?"

Mr. Limehouse: "No. Perhaps I must grant you that point."

Chairman: "So that...there is an affinity between the Labour Party and the great banking interests?...the point I am trying to make is this: The industrial capitalist, the useful man who makes goods, is almost always found on the Right, whereas the finance-capitalist who makes nothing but debts, is almost always found on the Left. Why is that?"

Mr. Limehouse: "I see your point and I would hazard the answer that the Liberal capitalist and the Labour man are both internationalists...and are able to provide each other with a considerable amount of mutual support."



Chairman: "I think the affinity lies rather deeper than that. I was discussing with Dr. Woad earlier in the day that strange body of the middle 'thirties known as The Next Five Years Group: It consisted in about equal measure of Fabian Socialists and P.E.P. capitalists and they had more in common than an internationalist outlook."

Mr Limehouse asks what possible advantage there could be for finance capitalism in an alliance with international Socialism which, if it were granted power, would simply abolish capitalism! The Chairman replies that this does not necessarily follow; not at any rate if the dominant power of the capitalist-socialist alliance lay with the finance capitalists based in Wall Street:

Mr Limehouse: "I had not thought of that! Yes. I see what you are driving at - a completely socialized Britain tied by one master-string to Wall Street, buying all that Wall Street requires to be bought and borrowing all that Wall Street requires to be borrowed. Whew!"

In answer to the Chairman's question as to how he would deal with such an alliance, Mr Limehouse replies that there is nothing to do "as long as we had Socialism here." Chesterton, through the person of the Chairman, now unveils the crux of his mature post-Fascist beliefs - that Britain should join with her Empire to resist the power of Wall Street, and Moscow:

Chairman: "You describe as 'setting free' the process of handing over the masses of India to the Congress financiers and their internationalist affiliates, and the handing over of the African and other peoples to Heaven knows whom? The Liberals agree I presume.....Let me summarise Labour Party policy as you have explained it to us. It is the work of Socialism in company with the great financial houses...to relinquish British sovereignty either to Wall Street or to Moscow, or else to a cosmopolitan composite of the two through the agency of some sort of League of Nations."

The enemy is defined - Communism, liberalism, Socialism and finance capitalism - the lowest common denominator of which is the "Jew". The unit of national revival against this threat is defined as Britain and the British Empire, the only force

Chesterton considers strong enough to resist Moscow and Wall Street. But what of the political banner around which British Empire patriots are to gather?

This question of the political grouping best suited to supplying the impetus for a national resurgence is covered in a fascinating scene in which two patients, both certified politically deranged, talk to each other. Both men are obviously Labour Party notables and one - Tom - is the author of a work attacking Tory M.P.s.\*

The other - Dick - has been given a truth drug designed to bring him "into full consciousness of political realities." The conversation is then listened to by the Chairman and his committee. As the drug begins to work their usually chummy conversation begins to dissolve into argument. Dick, now aware of political 'realities' begins by attacking as "utterly fatuous", Tom's work on the Tory Party:

"All that nonsense, for instance, about Tories having been at Eton, or having inherited money, or having married into this or that aristocratic family...if you really wanted to show the line-up between vested interests and politics you'd have done a good deal better to have concentrated on the international Liberals."

He also defends the Conservatives as representatives of the "creative kind of capitalism" - industrial capitalism. They are also, apparently, "traditionally associated with the greatest of all capital - the soil." He is, however, willing to admit that they have singularly failed to protect their natural constituencies against the rampages of economic liberalism:

Over/.....

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\*This is almost certainly meant to represent Simon Haxey, whose book Tory M.P. was published in 1939. In the work Haxey makes an all-out attack on Tory privileges, which he insists are defended by a turn to Fascism whenever they are seriously threatened. There is also a reference to Chesterton's biography of Mosley in its German edition. Cf. Simon Haxey, Tory M.P., Victor Gollancz, London, 1939.

Dick: "The reason for these failures is simple. Instead of standing out against the economic Liberal racket they have preferred to work the economic Liberal system...not because of any conscious betrayal but because of a fundamental lack of political and economic awareness. In other words, the case against the Conservatives is...that they have so lamentably failed to conserve those things which ought to have been conserved."

Tom: "They have conserved capitalism all right."

Dick: "Look, Tom! If the Conservatives ever find the inspiration and leadership to fight the international interests, if they ever really set out to cherish our native soil and to foster our national production, they will have more claim by far to the friendship and loyal support of the working men and women of Great Britain than the Liberals and Socialists and the rest of the Left-Wing added up and multiplied by two."

Tom: "Oho! So we may expect to find the Common Wealth lined up behind a dynamic Conservative Party...And you really hold that Conservatism is the answer to our economic problems?"

Dick: "I think it could be, but the Tories are too smug, too lazy, too politically supine to achieve a great deal. Look at their deplorable mishandling of the country's defences...The trouble was that Conservatives did listen to the Left - with very nearly fatal results...The Tory leaders may have been cowardly...but at least they showed a certain sense of responsibility."

No longer able to rely upon the bright faith of a Fascist Party to change society in its entirety, Chesterton turns to the Tory Party as a possible alternative. And here we have the core of Chesterton's post-Fascist creed, a mixture of Right-Wing Tory Empire Loyalism and conspiratorial anti-Semitism. To which, in the wake of mass coloured immigration into Britain, and black nationalist guerilla actions against British colonialism, he added the anti-coloured biological racism which he had carried with him from his childhood in the racially divided society of South Africa.

This is the figure so familiar to students of the National Front: ~~the~~ the obsessive conspiracy theorist who wrote The New Unhappy Lords, almost two hundred and fifty pages of meticulous exposure

of the supposed activities of the 'Money-Power', based upon uncited "authorities" because: "As a conspiracy by its nature is secret, it is not possible to bring against it a direct case, as distinct from a case based upon circumstantial evidence."<sup>61</sup> Gone now are the hopes that nationalism would succeed in Britain because of an "instinct of the blood." The transcendental hopes of Fascism lie buried beneath innumerable layers of racial and conspiratorial determinism. The fierce radicalism which had led him to reject all the 'Old Gangs' is tempered now with respect to the Tory Party (although it should be made quite clear that Chesterton soon revised this position in the wake of mass coloured immigration, independence for the Indian sub-continent, and the Suez debacle). Nationalism remains a driving force in his thinking, but in the era of the Common Market and the end of Britain's Empire, this is expressed much more in terms of Empire Loyalism.

Was there nothing left of his commitment to Fascist corporatism? The answer is yes. But now Chesterton entertained a comfortable fiction to prevent himself from having to promote this almost socialist ideal. This becomes clear in the scene in No Shelter For Morrison where Tom and Dick argue their cases:<sup>62</sup>

Tom: "There is nothing to be said in favour of a selfish capitalist totalitarianism."

Dick: "I agree. But Fascist dictatorship had no fiercer enemies than their own selfish capitalists. When you can't charge what prices you like, or speculate in food, or gamble in currency, your field of action as an irresponsible capitalist becomes somewhat restricted."

Tom: "I say, you are not justifying Fascism are you?"

Over/.....

Dick: "I detest and abominate Fascism with all the strength of my soul. But in a country where democracy has broken down, and where the people as a whole do not want communism, I see that a problem exists and that there is a prima facie case for subordinating sectional interests to the national interest. Thank Heaven there is no such problem in Britain."

Tom: "What if there were?"

Dick: "In that case I should indeed fight at the barricades."

Tom: "On whose side?"

Dick: "On the Communist side, of course. Though after a spell of Communism I should doubtless again find myself at the barricades, this time on behalf of the other side."

Tom: "A rip-roaring warrior, arn't you Dickie? At any rate why this homily? If you are not defending Fascism what are you doing?"

Dick: "I am trying to show you that there was not such sheer wayward unreason and evil in the original Fascist case..."

Fascism was now the last ditch defence against British collapse in the face of militant international finance capitalism, to follow a fruitless attempt to stem the tide with Communism. For the rest of his life Chesterton was able to persuade himself that the point had not been reached where such radical action was necessary.

What do these years of realignment tell us about Chesterton's original commitment to Fascism? First, and most importantly, they underline the fact that his was a cultural, rather than a biological form of Fascism. Hence his rejection of Hitler's claims to expand beyond what Chesterton considered to be the historical and cultural Reich. He was also genuinely horrified to discover the dynamic of genocidal horror contained within Nazism - further proof of the non-biological nature of his own deeply held anti-Semitic convictions.

But Chesterton's response to his loss of faith in Fascism also

reveals the depth of his anti-Semitic sentiment. Time spent in the Fascist firmament had bequeathed to him an unshakeable faith in the Jewish conspiracy (both economic and cultural) to dominate the world, and nothing, not even revelations about the Nazi concentration camps, could disabuse him of this belief. This, above all else, seems to suggest that there are psychological traits involved in Chesterton's move to Fascism.

This is made crystal clear in Man Possessed, in which Chesterton, on the rebound from Fascism in 1938-39, displays an inability to cope with the full complexity of good and evil as forces in the world. After discussing this play with me, Mrs Chesterton penned the following thoughts on its significance:<sup>63</sup>

"It is important to remember he wrote it in a white heat...It just had to come out. He wrote a great deal of himself into it, the important thing being the exorcism of evil. 'The Enemy' being once and for ever expelled, leaving unadulterated goodness. Only an idealist with a very clear idea of what 'the Enemy' actually was could have written it...The naivety of the conception is that evil and good could be separated, as the end of the play suggests...Psychoanalysis was very much in the air when K. wrote 'Man Possessed'. No wonder so much of it crept in..."

Sadly, this faith, so clearly revealed in Man Possessed carried Chesterton through the years of self-doubt and loss of transcendental faith in Fascism, and on into a career as Britain's leading racial-nationalist and conspiracy theorist.

CONCLUSION

THE TRAGEDY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

"After such knowledge - what forgiveness...."  
T.S. Eliot, Gerontion.

This thesis has been based upon one major premise, namely, that Chesterton's actions in becoming a Fascist have firstly to be understood in terms of an analysis of his ideology which, despite its obvious eccentricity, has to be taken seriously with reference to his personal life experiences. At the beginning of this project it was the belief of the author that beneath Chesterton's crude Fascist anti-Semitism in the 1930s lay an equally crude and unthinking personality. But, as Francis Bacon wrote over three hundred years ago: "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts..."<sup>1</sup> Having collected a great deal of material on Chesterton's earlier writings a new question arose: how could such a sensitive, intelligent, cultivated intellectual become a Fascist? At one level the question is obviously naive, based as it is upon the early post-Enlightenment doctrine that the more intelligent and cultivated an individual becomes the less likely he or she is to express irrational, or anti-humanitarian, sentiments. Nevertheless it still has to be explained why individuals like Chesterton were drawn to Fascism. And to accomplish this task it is necessary to take a serious look at Chesterton's intellectual development through the medium of a phenomenology of his ideological formulations. For, while sociological and psychological factors have a part to play in explaining Chesterton's move to Fascism, and are therefore a necessary part of the analysis, they are not sufficient to explain the discrepancy between the character of the man and the nature of his ideas: Chesterton did not join Mosley because he was a crazed authoritarian anti-Semite, nor because he was a member of a 'threatened' class, neither was it because



of threats to his personal status. Rather, his was a conscious decision which drew its most fundamental sanction from a belief on Chesterton's part that Fascism represented a logical, coherent, inspiring philosophy of life, which he believed to be rooted in some of the most prestigious intellectual traditions of English literature, and lessons of national history.

Of course, Chesterton was monumentally wrong in most of his conclusions. Much of his Fascist, and post Fascist writings are at best ill judged, and at worst downright dangerous. Throughout this thesis it has often gone without saying that we must utterly condemn Chesterton for his prejudices against the Jews and other peoples, and his ideas have been invested with a certain degree of internal consistency which belies their tenuous links to the objective socio-economic reality of the world. This is not to ignore the moral criteria involved in an appraisal of his work. To indulge in constant "ritual exorcism"<sup>2</sup> of Chesterton's ideas is unnecessary in the context of a search for the causes behind his acceptance of such beliefs. While it is similarly unnecessary to stress the fact that what appeared to Chesterton as a logical deduction, based upon a judicious examination of the facts of the case was, in fact, often an obfuscation of the true situation. This thesis is not an examination of the usefulness of Chesterton's ideas (this would be a truly supererogatory task) but rather an attempt to judge how he came to adopt them and how they formed a bridge between his perceptions and his acts. Moral indignation is simply not enough if we are to attempt to understand men like Chesterton. Faced with a similar problem in his study of Gobineau, Michael

Biddiss made the following important point:<sup>3</sup>

"...this study may also make some contribution to comprehending the nature of a more general range of political ideas reliant upon unreason and error. Author and reader alike might derive more immediate pleasure from discussing a wiser and more congenial kind of political thinking. But, while there survive dangerous ideas which - striving to conceal their errors beneath a garb of plausibility - continue to be capable of seducing the mind of man and of influencing adversely the conditions of his social existence, it clearly remains necessary to examine their nature and to criticize their conclusions."

Having made this point clear it is apparent that two main sets of conclusions can be drawn from this thesis. First, there are those findings which are directly related to the subject of the thesis: what factors can be said to have exerted a decisive influence over Chesterton's intellectual development into a Fascist ideologue, and what kind of Fascism did he espouse? The second group of conclusions relate to the wider issues of comparative analysis raised by these findings - how can a deeper knowledge of Chesterton's move to, and espousal of, Fascism, help us to understand the wider generic concept of 'Fascism' during the inter-war period? These more general conclusions are dealt with in a postscript to the conclusion.

The first finding of the thesis (and one of the most important) is that Chesterton's move to Fascism was not principally motivated by personality failure. There was little need to turn this biography into 'Freudography', in order to understand his motivations. It is true that the findings include the fact that he was obsessive, even fanatical in his pursuit of a cause, and that his personality displayed an inability to cope with the complexity of good and evil in the world. Likewise he showed a tendency towards stereotyped, conventional thinking, and towards an overvaluation of masculinity and virility. Yet these facets

are no more than undercurrents which, in different circumstances, might have found a more conventional outlet. For there was another side to Chesterton's personality - that which allowed him to maintain a successful marriage to an independent-minded socialist, and to make close friendships outside the ranks of the fringe-right. He was a charming man who inspired the affection and confidence of many who knew him personally. He possessed a warm sense of humour and fun, and delighted in relating humorous stories with suitable embellishments. In a letter to me Colin Cross recalled his meeting with him in 1960, when he interviewed Chesterton for his book on British Fascism:<sup>4</sup>

"In himself he was a very likable chap. A curious, hoarse voice. It struck me that his wife didn't seem to share his political views at all. At one moment, during lunch, I saw tears running down his cheeks; the cause was that he was explaining that his antisemitic writings during the 1930s had never been meant to lead to gas chambers or anything like that."

At the time Cross's assessment of Chesterton's character was similarly understanding:<sup>5</sup>

"A fervent patriot, with a schoolboyish enthusiasm for the British Empire, for a while A.K. Chesterton saw Mosley as the man who would remove the stains of industrialism from England's green and pleasant land. Chesterton was a polemical writer of the top rank and as such of great service to the B.U.F. He is a man of contradictions. Emotionally he is probably a non-conformist, a rebel against established conventions. Intellectually, he has supported ideals of authority and order. The contradictions may have produced in him the inner strain which seems to have prevented him from fully developing his literary talent."

His personality was indeed contradictory - far too much so for us to pin it down with a model of authoritarianism. In short, Chesterton does not seem to have turned to the Fascist solution through the principal agency of a psychological predisposition,

if we mean by this driven on by an internal compulsion to find a scapegoat and attack it for the good of his own mental stability. The forces behind his progression "from nothingness to commitment"<sup>6</sup> were much more complex than this.

Certain factors do, however, stand out as catalysts in this progression, most notably his South African childhood, his English public school education, and his experiences in the First World War, while others, such as the fact that he was a bourgeois literary intellectual, provided the contextual continuity within which his ideas developed.

The process began with Chesterton's birth into the British Uitlander elite at a time when its self-assurance was under attack in South Africa. His was a turbulent childhood spent initially in the company of those who most certainly exhibited a belief in racial paternalism towards the native African peoples and who, in addition, were suspicious of Jewish influence in South African society. Finally, it was a world filled with exaggerated pro-British (and anti-Boer) sentiments. Thus, from the age of his first social impressions, he was located in a society in which racism, anti-Semitism, and jingoistic patriotism, were the accepted norm, rather than the preserve of eccentrics. It was also a society which remained self assured. The Boers had been defeated in war, and the sun would never set on the British Empire. What insecurities were felt were expressed, as is ever the case with colonial elites, in terms of even more fervent protestation of loyalty to the metropolitan homeland.

During these early formative years Chesterton received little in the way of a proper formal education and his move to England

added only marginally to his love for formal education. Like the three German critics studied by Fritz Stern, he was largely self-educated, with a consequent mistrust for formal education, and a tendency to lack the self-critical faculty necessary for academic scholarship.

The principal legacy of his public school days would seem to have been a love of sport and England, both of which seem inextricably intertwined in his memories of the period: "all too brief were my brisk winter afternoons on the Rugby field, my tranquil summer evenings at the wicket or the nets." Henceforth England was, for him, an idealized and utopian vision of 'brisk' winter afternoons and 'tranquil' summer evenings - a fantasy world which he was to spend the rest of his life defending. The 'outsider' as super patriot is a common theme of sociological writing, and Chesterton provides us with a classic example of this phenomenon.

Then came the First World War and, in his naive terms, the culmination of his destiny - a chance to fight for his vision of the British Empire: "in the pride of my youth...trumpeted to battle by Rupert Brooke." (It was Brooke who wrote: "Now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour."<sup>7</sup>) In young Chesterton's case his introduction to adult life took place in the infamous East African Campaign, described by the Army Commander, Smuts, as "done under tropical conditions which not only produce bodily weariness and unfitness, but which create mental langour and depression and finally appal the stoutest hearts...the strain on all has been overwhelming."<sup>8</sup> This was followed by almost two years amidst the carnage of the Western Front in France and Belgium.

Seldom can expectations have been raised to such heights, or confounded to such a degree.

In many ways the war was the supreme event of Chesterton's life, the centre of a system of references and classifications which assigned priority to certain ideas and experiences and completely devalued others in his life. It gave him a sense of rupture with the past and provided him with a number of signposts for the future. It was the "vital horizon"<sup>9</sup> within which he began conscious historical life.

On the one hand it took away from him all his illusions about what constituted the heroism of war. In the East African Campaign the true heroes were those who could continue to find the will to fight after tramping for months over immense distances, where natural privations were a greater danger than the enemy; in a tropical climate where disease had hardly begun to be conquered, with tropical medicine still in its infancy. While war in the trenches of the Western Front was largely mechanical and impersonal. Men lay in mud and slime, often for days at a time, praying for survival; where Chesterton recalled that the smell of death crept even into the very food they ate. The real heroism of the trenches lay in survival, survival against monotony, against fear, against loss of hope that the war would ever end. Such conditions profoundly altered the lives of many men, and Chesterton was no exception.

On the other hand he discovered the warmth of true comradeship. Prior to the war he had had even less experience of the British working class than of the Black African servant caste. Now he was thrown into close proximity with them for literally years on end.

More than that, life in the trenches eroded the traditional class barriers which were so strong at that time in civilian society. Men of all classes: "lived and died together in holes, dugouts; they swore the same oaths; they looked forward to the same pleasures; and their lives were equally expendable, or at least equally expended."<sup>10</sup> It was this sense of solidarity across class barriers that allowed men like Chesterton to survive the war. He felt that he had been liberated from his individuality and egotism, and elevated to a higher state of being; that he had discovered the true nation under the stress of a national emergency. He had learned to live without most of the material requirements of life which he had been brought up to consider essential. In their place he had the 'spiritual' nourishment of comradeship, a sense of purpose amidst all the seemingly senseless carnage (perhaps Chesterton's greatest illusion). All this added a new dimension to his already strong sense of nationhood and self-sacrifice in its cause.

Chesterton really believed that he had witnessed a supreme truth on the battlefields of the Great War and in the vast wastes of Africa - that national ties transcended those of class. Henceforth his ideal community was that based on the comradeship of soldiers and the relationship of an officer with his men. Leadership was an essential part of this utopian vision. The political leader, like the officer, is like his men, sharing their aspirations and feelings, but he is not of them; for it is his duty to lead them to their common goal. The racial paternalism of Chesterton's childhood transferred to the context of white nationhood. And from this flowed his life-long attempt to

combine in a civilian government the disciplined <sup>hierarchical</sup> virtues of the warrior and man of faith, with those of the free individual.

The first few years after the cessation of hostilities saw his gradual retreat from utopian optimism, first into disillusion, and then into despair. Unlike his older comrades Chesterton was unable to return to the safe security of a wife and the responsibilities of a family - he was cast adrift in the world at the age of 19 to find his own way. Always estranged from liberal democratic politics, he was now faced with the full implications of a world economy tottering from boom to slump, freed from the constraints on the patently unequal conflict of "interest groups".

Chesterton was astounded. He had believed that men and women would, henceforth, be more sincere and open in their mutual dealings; that they would display the community spirit and become more sensitive to the needs of the nations as a whole; that they would never again be petty or small. After all, hadn't the fighting men achieved this very consummation and communion on the fields of battle? How much easier then to achieve it in the calm, rational, conditions of a civilian existence! He simply couldn't believe that all the sacrifice and suffering, the comradeship and leadership he had witnessed was in vain: surely this was a final rite of purification which mankind would never forget?

It was this that marked out Chesterton's attitude to the war from the majority of his comrades, who either accepted their reprieve from death with thanks and returned to their pre-war existence, or, like the 'war poets', adopted a cynical attitude to the slaughter, accepting it as a meaningless gesture



undertaken for the preservation of an effete society. In Man Possessed Wedstone's brother officer sees his friend's views on the impact of the war as naive in the extreme: "when you talk like that, you seem to me young beyond belief - terrifyingly young." This stands as a very accurate assessment of Chesterton's war-inspired idealism. Time had stood still for the child who had entered the war four years earlier.

His initial disillusion took him back to South Africa, where he discovered little but the rampant materialism of a frontier society, growing class and race conflict, and anti-British ferment. His brief period in this heated environment deepened his distrust of both Communism and the Jews (the latter being rooted in his childhood and his hero-worship of Cecil Chesterton)\* both of which he believed to have been instrumental in causing the 1922 'Red Revolt', in which he played so precipitous a part.

In disgust he flew into spiritual exile, taking with him his dreams of cultural and political renewal and expressing them through his increasingly metaphysically inspired writings. Those early articles in the Johannesburg Star in 1922, show so graphically his commitment to metaphysically inspired thought in seeking to overcome what is perceived to be an "age of Stygian darkness." In this period his passionate belief lay in the

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\*It may also have been reinforced by his experiences in the trenches. Guy Chapman wrote: "With each leave that fell to my lot now, there seemed to be a noticeable difference in England. Or was the difference only in myself...I was being forced like a plant in a hot-house...And as this process went on, I drew further away from England...on my arrival in London, I was as foreign as a Chinese, and could observe the natives with unfamiliar eyes and bitterly enjoy all the prejudices of another civilization...London seemed poorer and yet more raffish...It had become corrupted...There were ugly tales of money-making in coal, wheat, wool, tea, and other necessities far above legitimate profit...The 1914 values had gone bad, and instead the English were learning to respect one thing

practical social and political truths contained in the writings of great literature, drama and poetry.

It is difficult to over-emphasise the importance during this period of Chesterton's development into a literary intellectual, as well as a journalist. For it was this aspect of his thinking which allowed him to rationalize and develop the core of his pre-Fascist philosophy of life around one of the most fundamental lessons he drew from his wartime experiences - that reason was weaker than instinct, logic useless without feeling, that the irrational and spiritual needs of mankind were more important than the rational mind could comprehend. During the period between his return to England in 1924 and his decision to throw in his lot with Mosley in 1933, he developed a philosophy of life upon the fundamental belief that "the essential meaning of art is the provision of a vision of life".<sup>11</sup> In this Shakespeare was his exemplar - the perfect expression of national literature and ideas - and Shaw the philosopher - the man who most recognized the need for a poetic comprehension of world events. Before the turn of the century Shaw had written:<sup>12</sup>

"We are...witnessing a steady intensification in the hold of social questions on the larger poetic imagination...If people are rotting in all directions, and nobody else has the heart and brains to make a disturbance about it, the great writers must. In short, what is forcing our poets to follow Shelley in becoming political and social agitators, and to turn the theatre into a platform for propaganda and an arena for discussion, is that whilst social questions are being thrown up for solution almost daily by the fierce rapidity with which  
Over/.....

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\*[Continued]...only, money, and easy money by preference. It was better in France. There a man was valued rather for what he was than what he achieved." Guy Chapman, A Passionate Prodigality, quoted in Robert Wohl, The Generation of 1914, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980, p289.

"industrial processes change and supercede one another...the political machinery by which alone our institutions can be kept abreast of these changes is so oldfashioned...that social questions never get solved until the pressure becomes so desperate that even governments recognize the necessity for moving. And to bring the pressure to this point, the poets must lend a hand...."

And: <sup>13</sup>

"The truth is that dramatic invention is the first effort of man to become intellectually conscious. No frontier can be marked between drama and history or religion, or between acting and conduct."

Chesterton did not agree with Shaw that this meant that the playwright should indulge in didacticism, but he was equally convinced of the need to recognize the political and social 'truths' contained within great literary creation. And, when combined with his extreme nationalism this belief led Chesterton to set spiritual standards for political, social and moral life which were bound to be frustrated and denied in wider society. The gap between his vision of life as it could, and should, be lived, and the realities of an inter-war Britain riven by economic depression, mass unemployment and simmering class confrontation, could only deepen his flight into spiritual exile. Increasingly Chesterton became convinced of the contention that human creativity could only function from within the depths of a spiritual entity symbolized by the nation - a belief which reached fruition in his Fascist theory of 'decadence'. Fritz Stern wrote of the German critics that: "All their works were suffused by this mixture of cultural despair and mystical nationalism that was radically different from the untroubled nationalism of their contemporaries." Exactly the same mixture exists in Chesterton's aesthetic philosophy and it is in this sense that Thurlow is right to point out that Chesterton's strange

mixture of ideas "are more akin to patterns of thought prevalent in pre-Nazi German Conservatism than any English equivalent."<sup>14</sup>

Against the "demoralizing futility" of his age, Chesterton believed that a daring elite, led perhaps by an artist-philosopher-King (like Shaw's King Magnus) could turn back the tide of materialism and mass popular culture, and so rescue the nation from decadence and decline. He was a true Shavian theologian, believing that "so long as character is at grips with the world Hope must ever beckon from the portals of the future and life never be wholly unpleasant to the taste."<sup>15</sup> And here is yet another echo of his war experiences. Ostensibly the war had achieved nothing, and yet he stolidly refused to believe that this was really so. If men had achieved feats of real heroism and lived in true comradeship on the field of battle, it did not matter that the ends proved tragically false to the means employed. The effort had been made and could be made again. It was this quality of utopian optimism which separated Chesterton from fellow cultural elitists like T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, and literary cynics like Sassoon and Graves. It also separated him from the three German critics studied by Stern, for he insists that they were "conservative out of nostalgia and revolutionary out of despair",<sup>16</sup> while Chesterton exhibited a strange mixture of heroic vitalism and cultural despair, and was also revolutionary in his utopian optimism. \*

Viewed from the perspective of Chesterton's dream of a spiritual revolution that would eliminate both the exploiters and the exploited, fusing all sections of society into a unified, conflict free, national society, inter-war British society must indeed have appeared decadent and effete. Already estranged from

\*Although, as Eric Bentley suggests: "Extreme optimism is closer to extreme pessimism than to any intermediate view." The Cult of the Superman, p98.

the ideals of democratic politics, Chesterton's experiences of the local politics in Torquay reinforced this estrangement. He became increasingly convinced that democratic institutions and practices were responsible for allowing "cosmopolitan" values - Communism, finance capitalism, Jewish culture, materialism, class conflict, urban civilization, jingoistic patriotism, and mass popular culture - to flourish in Britain. In the last resort, having found no change in British society commensurate with his values of selfless sacrifice to the nation state, regardless of links of caste, class, or coterie, Chesterton's alienation from the spirit of his age led him to the only creed which could satisfy both the radical and reactionary elements of his ideology. Thus did he choose to throw his cultural despair, his heroic vitalism and nostalgia for the Golden Age of Elizabethan intellect and adventure, and his feeling of obligation to the dead of 1914-18, into the Fascist political melting pot. The man who saw himself as "born into the bondage of doubt", had discovered at last "the freedom of faith."<sup>17</sup>

To suggest, as Alistair Hamilton does, that for men like Chesterton such a decision was purely arbitrary is nonsense. For, while Chesterton believed himself to be a 'socialist' prior to his discovery of Fascism, that strand of British socialism which could have accommodated his extreme nationalism, absolute rejection of class conflict, and aesthetic elitism, was confined to the sentimental socialism of Robert Blatchford's Merrie England, and Havelock Ellis's brand of Fabianism. Whereas such ideas were undoubtedly central tenets of Fascist ideology.

The detailed examination undertaken in Chapter Six above of Chesterton's Fascist ideology underlines the argument of this thesis that his travail to Fascism was marked by a complex of personal and intellectual factors, and not the wanderings of a diseased mind through the labyrinths of its own paranoia.

Aside from the obvious anti-Semitism, the picture of Chesterton which emerges from the pages of his Fascist diatribes is that of a man obsessed with cultural nationalism and heroic vitalism; of metaphysical mysticism; of transcendental faith. His initial interest in joining Mosley was caused more by his visions of his new leader as a man of the Tudor aristocracy, the living embodiment of the poet-philosopher-king, than by any desire to deepen his anti-Semitism. Additionally, and quite correctly, he viewed Mosley as a brother officer and kindred spirit forged in the trenches, a man who also held deeply ambivalent views on the war, a fellow adherent of 'war socialism', a man also "on the rebound from Armageddon."

Indeed, Mosley's brand of Fascism was the 'great temptation' to which Chesterton was bound to fall sooner or later. As Skidelsky insists it offered the fusion of two hitherto conflicting impulses: "the quest for modernization and the revolt against its consequences."<sup>18</sup> It offered to unite the man of faith with the man of action: to reverence the nation above all other social and political entities - whether internal or external. It provided him with a historical blueprint based upon Spenglerian historicism and the conspiracy theory. It offered a real chance to achieve at one and the same time the spiritual regeneration of the individual citizen and the cultural rebirth of the nation. Or, more importantly, this is what Chesterton

believed it stood for. For, ultimately Moslèyite Fascism was, as with so many universal creeds, a chimera when pushed beyond the realm of theory. At the level of practice it quickly degenerated into a system of violence and abuse, both physical and verbal. It proved incapable of sustaining even internal 'comradeship' after the initial euphoria had dissolved in the wake of ideological and organizational splits. The 'warrior', the 'man of action' soon overcame the 'fact man', the man of faith. Even Mosley came to admit that his movement declined into an instrument of "violence for its own sake",<sup>19</sup>

Yet the greatest tragedy of Chesterton's adoption of the Fascist creed lay not so much in the false expectations it gave him as to its potential for achieving national spiritual and cultural renewal. Rather, it lay in the fact that it finally convinced him that the Jews were the most active enemy of all he held dear. For, in amplifying this element of his pre-Fascist thought from a mild disdain into a passionate rage, it facilitated his entry into the intellectual and political ghetto of the politics of prejudice, from which he was never to emerge."

The full tragedy of this becomes apparent in his immediate post-Fascist writings. Genuinely horrified by the manic attacks of the Nazis on the Jews and other peoples, Chesterton withdrew his support for many of the tenets of the Fascist creed (its leadership principle, its regimentation of the individual life, its vision of revolutionary change, its vision of a Fascist utopia) and toned down his language to distance himself from the genocidal strand of anti-Semitism.\* And yet he maintained an

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\*It can, of course, be argued that he was simply burying his pro-Nazi beliefs beneath a convenient veneer of rhetoric; but as one of the conclusions of this thesis is that he never held such ideals with regard to the Jews, this view is not sustainable.

unshakable faith in cultural and conspiratorial anti-Semitism, to which, in the wake of mass coloured immigration to Britain, he added the racism which he had carried with him from childhood.

To recap: in order to understand Chesterton's progression towards Fascism it has been necessary to consider him as an intellectual being, filtering the surrounding matrix of environmental forces and social stimuli that he encountered during his early life through a highly specialised form of personal cognition. At the same time he emerges as a man of his age, open to certain ideas and events, and cut off from others by the times through which he was living. Unless we take account of this factor it is difficult to understand his colonialistic and public school fostered love of Empire, and all but impossible to come to terms with the fact that Chesterton was genuinely blind to both the genocidal forces contained within anti-Semitism, and the imperialistic impulses of Nazism. On questions such as these we should avoid employing an inductivist perspective based upon incorrect ex post facto reasoning. Nor can we rely upon psycho-history to explain his move to Fascism. Chesterton deviates on many counts from the standard picture of the authoritarian personality. His happy marriage to a convinced socialist and pacifist, alone, is testimony to the fact that he was capable of flexibility in attitudes. Nor yet will a sociological model suffice. Chesterton was most certainly not an example of a frightened and threatened member of the petit-bourgeoisie. At the moment when he joined Mosley he could have opted for the highly-paid position as Chief Publicity Officer for the Stratford Memorial Theatre. And even if he had not



accepted this position, his skills as a journalist, drama critic, and Editor, would have stood him in good stead. His was a choice between a conventional career as a successful journalist, or an alliance with the extreme-Right in British politics. In short, Chesterton's decision to join Mosley rested principally upon ideological grounds, behind which lay a highly complex mixture of intellectual, social, cultural, historical and psychological, factors.

As far as these forces are concerned the single most important period was undoubtedly that which he spent fighting in the First World War. It was certainly thereafter the 'vital horizon' which marked the boundary between his childhood and manhood, and by which he referenced all subsequent events in his life. It gave him most of the basic beliefs and values which were to reach fruition in the Fascist synthesis. In many ways it came at exactly the right time to exert the maximum force in moulding the contours of Chesterton's adult ideas. He was sixteen when he entered the war in German East Africa, and Mannheim has suggested that it is as about the age of seventeen that men and women pass from the world of unconscious cultural influences to a conscious spiritual life in which they develop "original" intellectual solutions to the problems posed by experience.<sup>20</sup> In Chesterton's case this was to take place against the backdrop of the endless wastes and limitless privations of the African bush, and later in the mud and death of the Somme battlefield. Here, against all the odds, he was to find social harmony and intellectual aspiration.

That he should have found such spiritual nourishment amidst the manic chaos of the war must have rested in part upon his literary inclinations. There can be little doubt that, like many young bourgeois intellectuals of the period, Chesterton's aspirations were bolstered by the tradition of literary romanticism at the outset of the war. His admission that he was "trumpeted to war by Rupert Brooke" is clear evidence of this. While the fact that his first journalistic pieces, for the Johannesburg Star in 1922, were so concerned with metaphysical speculation, gives notice of the fact that he had continued to develop his interests in this respect since that time. Wedstone, in the play Man Possessed, tells Atherton that when the war is over he will use his reprieve from the ranks of the dead to write poems and plays.<sup>21</sup> As Paul Fussell points out, the Great War, at least for the officer class, was an unprecedentedly 'literary' war.<sup>22</sup>

"The efficiency of the postal service made books as common at the front as parcels from Fortnum and Mason's, and the prevailing boredom of the static tactical situation, together with the universal commitment to the ideal of cultural self-improvement, assured that they were read as in no other war."

Here was Chesterton's 'university'. Indeed he was now surrounded by the very men with whom he might well have gone to university had the war not occurred and had he been more inclined towards academic work. Under the circumstances there seems little doubt that Chesterton was already filtering his emotional and intellectual sensations through metaphysical channels before the end of his war service.

The war deepened his sense of patriotism and gave him a blueprint of social cooperation between men of different

classes. He concluded that true value could only emerge out of the depths of a spiritual impetus, symbolized by selfless dedication to the national ideal. At the time he believed that, in the wake of such a holocaust, the changes he desired would come about of their own accord once the fighting men returned home and made their rightful claim to a 'land fit for heroes'. Later, after it had become clear to Chesterton that there was no hope of realizing this dream, his life became (like Mosley's) a "continuous rededication"<sup>23</sup> to the ideals which he believed the dead of the battlefield had died fighting for. Chesterton could never admit that slaughter on such a vast scale could possibly have occurred without purpose. In 1918 Chesterton returned to civilian existence with a social, moral and political philosophy born, nurtured and defined in three highly artificial environments - colonial South Africa, the English public schools, and the field of battle. As such he was placed at the centre of the generational circumstances which helped to promote the growth of Fascism all over Europe.

From this point on there is almost a sense of pre-destination in Chesterton's move to Fascism. His involvement in the 1922 'Red Revolt' on the Witwatersrand, strengthened his nationalistic impulses and deepened his distrust of bourgeois democracy, the Jews and Communists. While his employment in Stratford, at the centre of metaphysically inclined speculation on the significance of Shakespeare's plays, allowed him to develop his cultural perspective on the world. Involvement in local politics in Torquay further estranged him from democratic political processes. The net result was an increasing sense of alienation on Chesterton's part from the spirit of his age. Consequently, he was increasingly

convinced that the clear message of the great poets and dramatists (as he interpreted them) was being ignored - that men should once again aspire to live like heroes, outside their own narrow self-interests, working together to achieve a political state, and a cultural nation based on 'spiritual', as distinct from material values; recognizing, once again, the irrational, emotional, intuitive, needs of human-kind, and rejecting the narrow scientific rationalism which insisted on quantifying everything before giving it a positive value.

Fascism offered Chesterton the chance to resolve all the elements of his thinking into one political creed, while at the same time vastly increasing the importance of anti-Semitism in his thinking. It was the perfect vehicle for Chesterton's aspirations as it offered the opportunity to solve the economic, social and cultural problems of the modern industrial state through a return to a passionate and abstract nationalism, which would find its objective expression through the autarchic nation-state. This, in turn, was to be realized through a return to a more 'positive', 'heroic', view of progress, which rejected the liberal bourgeois doctrine of automatic betterment for mankind, and stressed instead the need for constant striving under the direction of a dedicated and able leader. To Chesterton this meant a return to the 'ethical state', of order, hierarchy, obedience and duty. Shakespeare, his greatest hero had also supported such a society, believing that without such a purposeful 'chain of being', what was right and what was wrong, just and unjust, would cease to have any real meaning. But while Shakespeare's art rose above this rather stark view of human society, Chesterton's Fascism remained

circumscribed by his adherence to anti-Semitism. Thus, while his Fascism was of a kind described by Professor Sternhell as "mystical, romantic, anti-rationalist.." <sup>24</sup> and based upon a passionate loathing of poverty, greed, selfishness, and a sincere desire to establish a more just society, it is remembered for none of these elements. Chesterton is neither remembered for his social conscience, nor his utopian nationalism, but for his debased attacks on the Jews. It could hardly be otherwise!

But a fundamental lesson of this thesis is that Chesterton did not become a Fascist simply to attack the Jews. The lowest common denominator in his pre-Fascist thinking was not the Jew, but a particularly idealised vision of the British nation and its Empire. He had discovered the nation as an outsider, as a child in South Africa. He rediscovered it on the playing fields of Brightlands in 1911. The war convinced him that this nation, united with its Empire, was the highest flowering of civilization ever achieved. Shakespeare was its greatest prophet, and thereby the greatest man of culture ever to have lived. Britain, or, more strictly England, was elevated by Chesterton to the status of a fantasy world and the image he developed of the chief enemy of British nationhood, the Jews (after he became convinced that this was indeed the case) was equally fantastic and mythological. Professor Mosse has recognized the importance of this aspect of Fascist ideology: <sup>25</sup>

"The Fascist myth was based upon the nationalist mystique, its own revolutionary and dynamic traditions...and a continuation of the war experience in peacetime...It was a scavenger which attempted to annex all that had appealed to people in the nineteenth and twentieth century past...Too little attention has been paid to this scavenging; it has been subsumed under the so-called eclecticism of fascism. But in reality all these fragments of the past were integrated into a coherent attitude towards life through the basic fascist nationalist myth."

In a piece written in 1948, to his Jewish friend Joseph Leftwich, Chesterton revealed very clearly the link between his nationalism and his anti-Semitism:<sup>26</sup>

"...people believe that a man dubbed an anti-semite deals in diabolic prejudices, beyond the reach of reason, justice and even ordinary common decency.. [For] one encounters more potential or actual madmen [amongst the ranks of anti-Semites] than among any other group of human beings... For my own part, while not running away from the title anti-Semite, I can truthfully say that it gives me no pleasure. I would rather not possess it. The concept of England as a chivalrous and hospitable country is a precious one, which, other things being equal, I should like to cherish. Further, if I have energy to spare for personal hatred, I feel that it would have been more usefully directed against those unconscious traitors of my own race who for years have been befuddling and misleading the minds of the British people, thereby, furthering their national disintegration. There are other, more personal reasons why I deplore what I hold to be the present necessity for opposing Jewish influences. As a boy-soldier, slogging and fighting through German East Africa, my best friend and one of the staunchest of my comrades-in-arms was an Italian Jew. In this war, as a man of forty-one, my best friend and most efficient brother-officer in the Abyssinian campaign was a Jew from Nairobi. Between the wars I knew a number of Jews, liked some of them, disliked none so much as I disliked some Gentiles, received kindness from several and am happy to think that I was sometimes able to do them kindness in return. Neither is anti-semitism a hang-over of my earlier days, for as a young boy in Johannesburg I went to school with scores of Jews, and, so far from being aware of any racial antipathy, I not only had some among my friends but resisted the pressure of my elders who tried to make me give them up. If personal prejudice were involved, my own would clearly be on the Jewish side. I am what is called an anti-Semite mainly because I am a nationalist - a nationalist in the sense that I believe every nation to have its own guiding star which it must follow, its own ideal pattern which it must maintain, its own vision of the past, its own distinctive character, its own soul. Nationalism, as I see it, is the dynamic of communal aspiration and growth, just as its opposite, cosmopolitanism, is the negation of these things, leading to the uprooting, debasement and decay of spiritual values. Whether I am right or wrong, that is my belief, and my further belief - no less firmly held - is that Jewry at almost every level of contact exerts an influence hostile to this national idea. The bad Jew shamelessly exploits it. The good Jew, no matter how sympathetic he may be, always tends to distort it, and never more so than when he sincerely espouses it. It is not an act of malice on his part: the phenomenon is entirely due to his essential separateness - the separateness which his refusal of absorption through the ages so signally proclaims... If the holding of these beliefs is the mark of a madman, then I am prepared to be accounted mad. If their utterance is a mark of criminality, then I am prepared to go to jail.

In this piece we can clearly see the thread of extreme nationalism which runs through the entire corpus of Chesterton's adult thinking and pre-dates his extreme anti-Semitism. But it also reveals the tragedy of Chesterton's life. For with his acceptance of the Jews as the anti-nation, and Fascist conspiratorial anti-Semitism, he did in fact come to accept "diabolical prejudices, beyond the reach of reason, justice, and even common decency." Whatever Chesterton really meant by his article "The Apotheosis of the Jew", the net result can only be termed as a series of fantasies disguised as ideas, which can only detract from the world's totality of knowledge. But there is a greater tragedy still in all this. For Chesterton's path towards the acceptance of such prejudices does not seem to have been directed through the principal agency of an inherent character defect, or personality failure. One feels with Chesterton that, given a less narrow childhood, and a calmer, less violent, young adulthood, he could have developed his literary talents without any need to find a scapegoat for the good of his own mental stability.

In a sense we are all victims of our historical and social circumstances, but the circumstances surrounding Chesterton's youth give a special meaning to the word 'victim'. He was born into a world in which the familiar ideals and attitudes of his childhood were swept aside by war, and where his newly constructed battlefield philosophy was simply incapable of realization. In fact many of the intellectual landmarks of his life were either discredited by the time he reached manhood, or were never realized. Surrounded by attitudes and values hostile to his own, and turns of event he had not anticipated, Chesterton found in Fascism confirmation that in a seemingly crazy world, it does not

do to rule out bizarre explanations. However, in synthesizing his battlefield philosophy and cultural despair with Fascist anti-Semitism, he became trapped within the self-fulfilling determinism of the conspiracy theory. Consequently, instead of employing his personal charm and undoubted talents as a journalist and literary critic in the cause of humanity, he spent the remainder of his life employing deplorable polemics against a mythological enemy.

As the reviewer of Chesterton's The New Unhappy Lords for the Times Literary Supplement said, in 1965: "It is pathetic and yet disturbing that this can still be written...the belief in political witchcraft dies hard in this country."<sup>27</sup> In reading this one is forcefully reminded of Chesterton's words in his 1928 review of Hamlet, in which he displays his great gift for creative reviewing: "Here is tragedy if you like, my masters....."

#### POSTSCRIPT

##### Some Thoughts on the Comparative Study of Fascism.

While there is no agreed definition of Fascism, the number of competing theoretical models of the phenomenon are legion. It has been seen variously as a form of totalitarianism, a form of mass psychosis, an indication of the growing secularization of mass societies, the natural result of the inherent contradictions of monopoly capitalism, an epochal phenomenon - restricted to the inter-war period, a revolt of the threatened petit bourgeoisie, a revolt by a rising section of the bourgeoisie, one of several possible routes from pre-industrial to modern society, and a 'Bonapartist' alliance between the ruling class and the declassed



elements in society.<sup>28</sup> It has also become increasingly apparent that whatever the basic affinities between all the national forms of Fascism in the inter-war period, they were considerably altered by national traditions and historical circumstances. Indeed, in recent years Renzo de Felice and others have claimed that there were enormous differences between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism: "They are two worlds, two traditions, two histories..."<sup>29</sup>

Obviously the study of one Fascist in one country cannot begin to resolve the competing claims of these theoretical models. Nevertheless, it can either substantiate, or deny, certain aspects of these theories. For instance, in the light of our knowledge of Chesterton's move to Fascism we can question Alastair Hamilton's claim that for radicalized literary intellectuals like Chesterton, the choice between Communism and Fascism was often arbitrary. Or rather by also looking at other biographies of 'literary' Fascists of the period we can build up a picture which contradicts Hamilton's claim. For Chesterton now joins the list of Drieu La Rochelle, and Robert Brasillach, in whom recent biographical attention has been shown,<sup>30</sup> and whose move to Fascism was dictated by much more than mere chance.

Nor does the example of Chesterton support Martin Kitchen's assertion that Fascist ideas had little claim to the title of ideology, representing rather a jumble of "half-baked and cranky ideas", which cannot be used to understand the phenomenon of Fascism:<sup>31</sup>

"Fascism cannot be understood in terms of a phenomenology of ideological formations, but only in terms of its fundamental objective causes. The roots of Fascism, like those of any other social movement, are not in the mind or in the realm of ideology, but in society."

The theoretical argument over this point was dealt with in the Introduction (ppxi-xiii). The practical consequences of using a phenomenological methodology are contained in the pages of this thesis. They reveal that we can indeed trace back from Chesterton's ideological beliefs the objective causes behind his adoption of Fascism. Of course, Chesterton's ideas are eccentric and, more often than not quite wrong. He was neither entirely systematic in his thinking, nor completely consistent. During much of the pre-Fascist period he was groping after ideas which he did not clearly see. Nonetheless there is a clear pattern in his thinking, with its mystical nationalism, cultural despair, and desire to see the discipline and comradeship of the soldier united with the creativity of the free individual to create a state based on 'spiritual values'. We can see clearly the way in which he erected an idealised, utopian, fantasy world of British nationhood, and counterposed it with an equally unreal Jewish world of cosmopolitan internationalism. The 'roots' of Chesterton's Fascism most certainly lay in his social and historical situation - his bourgeois colonial background in South Africa, his public school experiences, the First World War, his post-war journalism - but many men shared these experiences without turning to the ultimate sanction of so extreme a creed. Between the social roots and the social movement stood the mediating force of Chesterton's personal cognition. Of vital importance here was Chesterton's literary preoccupations, for these allowed Chesterton to construct and succumb to an idealized national heritage and an imaginary and utopian future. And the fact that it was simply a figment of his imagination

does not alter the fact that it exerted a considerable influence over Chesterton's decision to throw in his lot with British Fascism in 1933. As Professor Biddis suggests ideas "striving to conceal their errors beneath a garb of plausibility - continue to be capable of seducing the mind of man and of influencing adversely the conditions of his existence."<sup>32</sup>

One attempt to deal with the problem of British Fascism in the inter-war period has centred upon an argument which implies that all anti-Semites of Fascist persuasion, including those who distinguish between ethnic groups on cultural grounds, are genocidal Nazis at heart. This is central to the work of Gisela Lebzelter on political anti-Semitism in England between the wars,<sup>33</sup> in which she suggests that the only exception to this rule was the "bourgeois anti-Semitism" of the kind found in exclusively Gentile golf clubs at that time. This is a view shared by both Kitchen and Billig.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Chesterton simply doesn't fit this rather simplistic model. Although a leading Fascist anti-Semite he based his prejudices upon a mixture of cultural and conspiratorial beliefs and, in spite of the viciousness of his attacks on the Jews, he was genuinely outside the genocidal tradition. Hence his retreat from the extreme anti-Semitic imagery of the 1930s in his later work, while remaining a convinced anti-Semite. He never mixed his conspiratorial beliefs with biological racism to produce the "Manichean Weltanschauung" ascribed to him by Dr. Lebzelter.

The lesson to be learnt from this is that it is wrong to analyse Fascist anti-Semitism sui generis as Lebzelter does. Only by looking at the whole range of Chesterton's Fascist

thought can we come to appreciate the fact that, while his cultural and conspiratorial anti-Semitism is no less irrational than biological racist anti-Semitism, it is qualitatively different in its implications for policy. For while the latter leads to genocide, the former ends in a 'utopian' vision of separation and emigration. It was this distinction which sent Joyce to Germany in 1939 and Chesterton into the British Army. It was also a distinction which allowed Chesterton to modify his beliefs in reaction to the horror of genocide, and to utterly condemn such Satanic beliefs.

Not all the lessons of this man's road to Fascism are negative with regard to previous theories of Fascism. For he emerges from the study, in spite of the many idiosyncrasies he displays, as very much a representative figure of his epoch. As such he helps to show that inter-war European Fascism contained an epochal element. In this context Professor Felice has written:<sup>35</sup>

"It is necessary to establish once and for all what is meant by Fascism. We must develop a model to which we may refer with reasonable certainty; and we must decide whether it is to be considered an individual phenomenon dictated by a specific historical moment in determined countries and brought about by contingent, nonrecurring circumstances, or whether it should be viewed as but one of the possible forms of political and social organization that mass societies encounter at a given stage of development."

Chesterton's case seems to point to the need to take account of both of these historical forces in any meaningful model.

Certainly there are forces acting upon him - economic depression, mass unemployment, social dislocation, moral division - which are undoubtedly more to do with the problems of advanced industrial capitalism, as they are still experienced today, than with the period between the wars alone.

Even cultural pessimism is not exclusive to the period.

The subjects of Fritz Stern's work on cultural pessimism exhibited similar anxieties long before the First World War. While, during the 1970s, the metaphysically trained mind of Bernard Levin, in collision with the tensions created by the breakup of the post-war consensus in politics, turned increasingly to an aesthetic analysis of contemporary events. This culminated in a series of articles, published in The Times in November 1979, which could well have been written by the youthful Chesterton. In them Levin warns of the danger of national decline brought about by "collectivists" who ignore the irrational needs of man as expressed in works of great art. He attacks the "tattered superstitions of materialism and collectivism", which refuse to admit that man is greater than the sum of his physical parts:<sup>36</sup>

"...man has nothing in him that cannot be found by a surgeon measured by a psychometrist, or indeed ordered about by an official; philosophies which insist that man has something else and even that man's purpose is to have it and to answer for the use of it, are romantic fallacies; the Crucifixion of Tintoretto consists of pigment applied two-dimensionally to a canvas in such a manner as to convey an optical illusion of three-dimensionality, and Professor B.F. Skinner, despite the dreadful warning of his initials, is to be taken seriously.. Tintoretto is only paint, so...a thousand monkeys, set to a thousand typewriters, would eventually by going through all possible random combinations of letters, produce the complete works of Shakespeare."

Like Chesterton, Levin assures his readers that he himself is not a Christian, and yet applauds those who call for a new morality based upon a meaningful faith in mankind as more than a collection of rational beings.<sup>37</sup> Is this an example of cultural despair? Of course a proper study of Levin's work during this period would be the only way to finally decide the matter decisively. But there does seem to be a prima facie case for answering this

question in the affirmative. It does seem that Levin's love of the works of Shakespeare and Wagner facilitated the intrusion into his political work of moral standards more suitable to the universe of King Lear, Hamlet, and Siegfried, than to the immediate problems facing modern Britain. In the light of this it may be that the concept of 'cultural despair', used originally by Stern, and borrowed in this thesis, could be extended in a major study of the transfer of literary and aesthetic values into politics by those European intellectuals of literary inclination and political involvement. In short, that cultural pessimism is still the constant temptation of such metaphysically minded individuals who, in an earlier age, would perhaps have been born into the 'freedom' of faith in religion, but who instead find themselves in love with the ideas and morality of an age of faith as encapsulated in the works of long dead artists, and yet brought up as intellectuals in an age dominated by rationalism, scepticism and materialism.

On the other hand cultural pessimism, on its own, is seldom sufficient to lead to Fascist activism. In Chesterton's case it was an important precondition of his move to Fascism, along with his colonial attitudes. But nothing indicates that these attitudes would have developed into Fascism without the direct and indirect trauma of World War One and its immediate and long term consequences upon him. It is in this sense that Chesterton was a representative figure of his epoch, and his Fascism an epochal phenomenon. As such he can be compared with others of his generation to whom Fascism was the "great temptation".

Fortunately, since work on this thesis began two excellent

pieces of scholarship have appeared on this subject. The first to appear was Frank Field's study of Three French Writers and the Great War,<sup>38</sup> which deals with the general question of the radicalising influence of the holocaust upon sensitive intellectuals. His three subjects are the Fascist Drieu La Rochelle, the Communist Henri Barbusse, and the Catholic mystic Georges Bernanos. All three were French novelists and each was profoundly influenced by his involvement in the Great War. The war convinced them that liberalism was inadequate for the continued success of European civilization. Each, for their own reasons, opted for a different creed as the solution to this problem. But what united them and gives them some claim to be representative figures of their epoch was their reaction to the war. Field's conclusions have a familiar ring to anyone who has read this thesis:<sup>39</sup>

"In the first place they were all romantics, ardently searching for some all-embracing explanation of the world, for some form of brotherhood that would enable them to transcend the loneliness of the human condition...After welcoming the outbreak of the First World War as the fulfilment of his hopes, each of them came out of the war with his basic pessimism greatly accentuated. To the end of their lives, all three remained divided personalities. For all of them the lessons they learnt from the First World War were profoundly contradictory...The tensions that afflicted these men were spiritual as well as political....But simply to give oneself up to despair is an admission of failure, and what these three writers had experienced in the war was that, in circumstances of hardship and danger and in the constant presence of death, it is possible for men to achieve a sense of solidarity in the face of despair. Perhaps this is what constitutes the most important link between Barbusse's Communism, Drieu's Fascism and Bernanos's Catholicism, for all three writers came out of the First World War convinced that mankind must strive for unity or perish, and all three looked back on the comradeship they had experienced during the war as a source of inspiration and hope."

These men did not share Chesterton's background, nor even his nationality; two of them didn't even share his Fascism, yet they all shared his profound mixture of despair and optimism through

a common vision of human heroism, self-sacrifice and brotherhood. As Bernanos observed: "Our war has become part of us. It did this while our boots were rooted in the mire. It still clings to our bones."<sup>40</sup>

The second work (by Professor Robert Wohl) is entitled The Generation of 1914,<sup>41</sup> and is a highly successful attempt to deal with the whole question of "generation" thinking in relation to the Great War. At the heart of this generation, Wohl argues, were men who, like Chesterton, were bourgeois intellectuals born between 1880 and 1900, and who experienced a profound sense of rupture in their lives caused by participation in the First World War. Of special interest here is the prominence given by Wohl to literary intellectuals as the source of the "generational idea" which quickly became established all over Europe among the demobilized fighting men in the inter-war period:<sup>42</sup>

"Not a social class in their own right, these intellectuals were distinguished by their possession of a secondary education and their activity as creators of the symbols and images with which the members of other social groups interpreted and gave meaning to their lives...Early twentieth century intellectuals were seldom rich. Most depended upon newspapers for the support of their families and the cultivation of their talent....they thought of themselves as the bearers and embodiment of culture - and when they used the word 'culture', they were inclined to write it with a capital 'C'...."

Wohl's delineation of the impact of the War upon such men parallels in many ways that registered by Chesterton, producing in many a burning desire to see the creation of a civilian world based upon the spiritual values of comradeship, heroism, self-sacrifice and brotherhood. Brought up to revere the nation they belonged to, and the belief that the national community transcended interests of class, it was the individuals of



Chesterton's age group who were most attached to these beliefs.

According to Wohl:<sup>43</sup>

"They could not throw off their memories of warfare, for the war was the moment of their lives that seemed most noble and most real...Fascism appealed to many members of this age-group because Fascist ideology seemed to incorporate these values and because Fascism held out the promise of a revolution in which both money (capitalism) and the mob (the working classes) would be subject to the rule of spirit (interpreted by intellectuals of the middle and upper classes). To this extent it is fair to say that Fascism was the great temptation of the generation of 1914."\*

While Wohl's concluding remarks about the literary intelligensia's reaction to their experiences is especially relevant to this study of Chesterton's path to Fascism:<sup>44</sup>

"Alas, neither the education nor the experience of these men prepared them to meet these challenges and accomplish these tasks. This was especially true of the literary intellectuals of this age group. Most remained obsessed by the fantasy of heroic action. Though themselves prisoners of positivism in their approach to history and society, they had little sympathy for the 'materialistic' ambitions of the workers and peasants to better their lives and achieve greater self-esteem. They resented, or at best were ambivalent about, industrial society. They placed 'spirit' and 'culture' above dignity and need...They were never able to free themselves from the conviction, given lasting shape by the war, that they were living through an apocalypse from whose smoke and flame a new cultural style must necessarily emerge. This obsession with cultural renewal betrayed their nineteenth-century origins...Few considered the social and economic organization of society worthy of analysis. Intellectual and moral values, they thought, were infinitely more important than social or economic facts. This attitude gave their social thought a utopian, quixotic and ultimately reactionary quality. They wavered uncertainly and unpredictably between a desire to spring forward into the future and a longing to return to the hierarchies of the past."

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\*Professor Juan J. Linz, has made the interesting observation that: "more than half the [European] Fascist leadership was born between 1890 and 1910 and consequently participated in World War 1." Whereas the Socialist leadership in inter-war Europe was born mainly in the period 1860-1880 and: "Not having been in the cohorts called for front duty, they would not share the enthusiasms and despairs caused by the experience." "Some Notes Towards a Comparative Study of Fascism in Sociological and Historical Perspective." In Walter Laqueur (ed.) Fascism: A Reader's Guide, Wildwood House, London, 1976, p44.

In this sense Chesterton's Fascism was a product of his epoch. For he was truly a member of Wohl's 'Generation of 1914'.

There is one final lesson to be learnt from Chesterton's Fascism, and that is that British Fascism, as represented by the B.U.F., contained within its ranks men who were motivated by fundamentally different obsessions, beliefs and aspirations, in spite of their common acceptance of the title of 'Fascist'. Chesterton's passionate nationalism and cultural mysticism stands in sharp contrast to Mosley's authoritarian modernism - essentially a synthesis of the ideas of the social imperialists, with those of Hobson, Keynes and Spengler.<sup>45</sup> Nor can Chesterton's Fascist commitment be easily equated with that of William Joyce, whose deeply held racial determinism gave his fascism an allegiance which transcended the claims of mere nationhood - that of race. Joyce's biological racism, Mosley's self-assertive Fascism of planning and Chesterton's cultural nationalism were all authentically 'Fascist' attitudes. What they reveal is that Fascism is not a unitary social and political doctrine, but, like any other generic concept, a coalition of interests and beliefs around a few shared assumptions.

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## NOTES

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### Abbreviations

- AKC        Arthur Kenneth Chesterton
- BUF        British Union of Fascists
- CC\*        Candour Collection: (In the care of Miss Rosine de Bounevialle, Forest House, Liss Forest, Hampshire.)
- VB\*        Vintage Books Collection: (In the care of Mr Aidan Mackey, 15 Shaftesbury Avenue, Bedford.

\*It should be noted that none of the material from these major Chesterton Archives has been catalogued.

B.N.M.L.   Blame Not My Lute, Chesterton's unpublished auto-biography, written between 1966 and 1973, held by Candour Library.

### INTRODUCTION

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- 6        op. cit., p344.
- 7        Ibid. passim.
- 8        William R. Tucker, The Fascist Ego: A Political Biography of Robert Brasillach, U.C.L.A. Press, London, 1975. Frank Field, Three French Writers and the Great War, Cambridge University Press, London, 1976. Michael A. Ledeen, The First Duce, D'Annunzio at Fiume, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1977. For a more psychological view of Drieu La Rochelle, see Robert Soucy, Fascist Intellectual, U.C.L.A. Press, London, 1979. And for a more general overview see, Robert Wohl, The Generation of 1914, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1980.

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- 11 Ibid. ppxxiv-xxvi.
- 12 Ibid. pxxv.
- 13 Arthur Koestler, The Observer, 23rd November 1980, p28.
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- 15 op cit., pxxiii and xxvi.
- 16 Ibid. pxxvii-xxviii.
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- 26 AKC, Notebook for Chapter One of B.N.M.L., (VB, Uncatalogued M.S.) See also B.N.M.L., CC Uncatalogued M.S., Chapter Two, "Chinks on the Rand", p13.
- 27 AKC, Notebook to Chapter One of B.N.M.L.
- 28 Doris Chesterton, Testimony of the Aunts, unpublished notebook of memories of her husband and conversations with his family, written by Mrs Chesterton shortly after her husband's death in 1973-4 and in her possession, pp6-7.

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- 29 Ibid. p1.
- 30 A.K.C. Notebook for Chapter One of B.N.M.L., p2. VB.
- 31 Ibid. p3. Also B.N.M.L., Chapter 8, p6.
- 32 A.K.C., B.N.M.L., Chapter 2, p13.
- 33 Interview with Doris Chesterton, May 9th 1978, p1.
- 34 Doris Chesterton, Testimony of the Aunts, p8.
- 35 Interview, May 9th 1978, op cit., p1.
- 36 B.N.M.L., Chapter 2, p15.
- 37 Crisp, op cit., p469.
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- 39 Notebook for Chapter One of B.N.M.L., p6.
- 40 B.N.M.L. op cit., Chapter 2, p13.
- 41 Notebook for Chapter One of B.N.M.L., pp9-10.
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- 45 Ibid.
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- 47 Doris Chesterton, op cit., pp13-14.
- 48 Ibid. pp15-16.
- 49/50 B.N.M.L. op cit., Chapter 2, pp14-15.
- 51 Doris Chesterton, op cit., p13-18.
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- 54 Adorno et al, op cit., p971.
- 55 Doris Chesterton, op cit., p9 and 22.
- 56 Henry V. Dicks, "Personality Traits and National Socialist Ideology", Human Relations, 3, No 2, (1950): pp140-150.
- 57 Indeed, many of Chesterton's closest colleagues in the post Second World War period were women, and there is no doubt that he enjoyed a "normal" and successful marriage to Doris.
- 58 -
- 59 Simpson and Yinger, op cit., p80.
- 60 See Below: Chapters Four, Five and Six.
- 61 Erich Fromm, The Fear of Freedom, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960, passim.
- 62 David Spitz, "Power and Personality: The Appeal to the 'Right Man' in Democratic States," American Political Science Review, 52, (March 1958): p88.
- 63 See: Simpson and Yinger, op cit., Chapter 3, pp63-102.
- 64 Holmes, op cit., p160.
- 65 Keppel-Jones, op cit., pp139-140.
- 66 L. Thompson, The Unification of South Africa - 1902-1910, Heinemann, London, 1960, p12.
- 67 Le May, op cit., p36.
- 68 Stone, op cit., p120.
- 69 James Bryce, Impressions of South Africa, Macmillan Press, London, 1900, p419.
- 70 Troup, op cit., p198.
- 71 B.N.M.L. Chapter 2, p16.
- 72 H.J. and R.E. Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969, p99.
- 73 Ibid. pp86-87.
- 74 B.N.M.L., Chapter 2, pp16-17.



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- 75 B.N.M.L., Chapter 2, pp17-18.
- 76 Ibid. p18.
- 77 Ibid. Chapter 3, p1.
- 78 Ibid. p1.
- 79 CC/Uncatalogued: Letter to Austin Perkins, 28 Heany Avenue, North End, Bulawayo, Rhodesia, 15th June 1973.  
"As a very young child I went to school in the city where you are living. It was attached to St. John's Church, opposite the Hotel Cecil, but has long ceased to exist".
- 80 B.N.M.L., Chapter 3, p3.
- 81 CC/Uncatalogued: Papers relating to Chesterton's libel action against The North Shore Review, dated 16th February, 1955.
- 82 VB/Uncatalogued.
- 83 B.N.M.L., Chapter 3, p4.

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- 1 Doris L. Chesterton, Testimony of the Aunts, p25.
- 2 B.N.M.L. op cit., p28.
- 3 CC. Uncatalogued.
- 4 Mrs. Cecil Chesterton, The Chestertons, Chapman & Hall, London, 1941, p36.
- 5 Ibid. p34.
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- 8 Ibid. Chapter 3, p4.
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- 10 Ibid.
- 11 CF. William Ashworth, An Economic History of England 1870-1939, Methuen, London, 1969, Chapter VIII, pp190-215. Also, E.J. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, Pantheon Books, New York, 1968, Chapter 9, pp144-163.

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- 13 B.N.M.L. op cit., Chapter 3, p4.
- 14 Ibid. pp4-5.
- 15 Doris L. Chesterton, op cit., p33.
- 16 Ibid. p34.
- 17 Graham Greene, A Sort of Life, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1977, p11.
- 18 Ibid. p59.
- 19 Ibid. p54.
- 20 B.N.M.L. op cit., Chapter 3, p5.
- 21 Graham Greene, op cit., pp62-63.
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- 23 Christopher Isherwood, Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties, New Directions, London, 1947, p11.
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- 25 B.N.M.L. Chapter 3, p5.
- 26 Ibid. p6.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 A.K. Chesterton, "Armistice and Time's Irony", Torquay Times, November 14th, 1930, p11.
- 29 A.K. Chesterton, All Aboard For Addis, Chapter 1, p6.
- 30 Ibid. pp3-4.
- 31 Kenneth Rigby (Pseud) Address Valhalla - A Short Story, Circulated by the Alan Fletcher Agency, Corbett House, West Byfleet, Surrey. VB./Uncatalogued.
- 32 In connection with this CF. Letter from Hing Shung Mok (in his letter he informs Chesterton that he was known at school as Hing Sung Mok), 140 Boundary Street, 1st Floor, Kowloon, Hong Kong, 8th July 1955. "Many thanks for your letter which I read over and over again. It was a real joy to hear from you after more than forty years. It made me feel young again. Your late grandparents were kind and hospitable to me. I still remember to this day that they took me to a matinee at the Coliseum. CC./Uncatalogued.

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- 33 Ibid. p1.
- 34 Ibid. p8.
- 35 Quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight, London 1965, p62.
- 36 B.N.M.L. op cit., Chapter 4, pp1-2.
- 37 CF. Brian Gardiner, German East: The Story of the First World War in East Africa, Cassell, London, 1963, passim.
- 38 B.N.M.L. op cit., Chapter 4, p2.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid. pp2-3.
- 42 Ibid. p6.
- 43 Ibid. p7.
- 44 Freda Troop, op cit., p226.
- 45 Brian Gardiner, op cit., pp130-131, and 194-195.
- 46 Ibid. p194.
- 47 B.N.M.L. op cit., Chapter 4, p1.
- 48 A.K. Chesterton, "Jungle March on a Cup of Flour." Torquay Times, December 13th, 1929, p9.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Interview, with Doris L. Chesterton, May 9th, 1978, p2.
- 51 B.N.M.L. op cit., Chapter 5, p1.
- 52 CF. Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp3-35, passim.
- 53 Philip Larkin, MCMXIV, quoted in Fussell, op cit., pp18-19.
- 54 Paul Fussell, op cit., passim
- 55 A.K. Chesterton, All Aboard For Addis, Chapter 2, pp19-20. This was written in 1943-45, but later when he came to write B.N.M.L. he avowed that it was during his period as a reporter for the Johannesburg Star in the early 20s that he first began to drink. CF. B.N.M.L., Chapter 8, p8.

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- 56 Paul Fussell, op cit, pp157-158, passim.
- 57 Ibid. pp196-197.
- 58 Ibid. pp198-199.
- 59 Ibid. pp21-23.
- 60 A.K. Chesterton, "Armistice and Time's Irony", Torquay Times, November 14th, 1930, p11.
- 61 A.K. Chesterton, "Home Fires", in:Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation. T Werner Laurie, London, 1931, pp13-14.
- 62 CF. A.K. Chesterton, Torquay Times, April 26th, 1929, "I would have them watch Percy Hotspur leaping upon death as an athlete upon a ball."
- 63 A.K. Chesterton, "The Battle of the Somme: Some Thoughts on 'Then' and 'Now'." Stratford-Upon-Avon Herald, January 27th, 1928, p2.
- 64 A.K. Chesterton, "Journey's End and the End of Every Man's Desire.", Torquay Times, 30th August 1929. Reprinted in Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, op cit, pp3-11. I have not been able to trace the original review from the Malvern Festival, which was probably syndicated as Chesterton was between jobs at Stratford and Torquay at the time and was working as a Fleet Street sub-editor.
- 65 -
- 66 Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, op cit., Introduction, pvii.
- 67 Ibid. p3.
- 68 Doris L. Chesterton, op cit., pp45-46.
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- 71 Ibid. Chapter 14, p1.
- 72 A.K. Chesterton, "British Union Was Born In War". Action, No 91, November 13th, 1937, pp10-11.
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- 74 A.K. Chesterton "Armistice and Time's Irony", Torquay Times, November 14th, 1930, p11
- 75 Robert Graves, Goodbye to All That, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1977, p157.

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- 76a A.K. Chesterton, "The Battle of the Somme." Stratford Herald, op cit.
- 76b A.K. Chesterton, "When the Home Fires Were Kept Burning". Torquay Times, December 19th, 1930, p2. Reprinted in Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, op cit., pp12-16.
- 77 A.K. Chesterton, "All Quiet on the Western Front." Torquay Times, January 9th, 1931, p11. Reprinted in Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, op cit., pp17-22.
- 78 Siegfried Sassoon, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, London, 1930, p280.
- 79 A.K. Chesterton, "Armistice - And a Thirteen Year Odyssey", Torquay Times, November 13th, 1931, p10.
- 80 Cf. Chapters 4,5, and 6 below, passim.
- 81 A.K. Chesterton, "Armistice- And a Thirteen Year Odyssey." op cit.
- 82 A.K. Chesterton, "Journey's End and the End of Every Man's Desire", Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, op cit, p10.

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- 1 A.K. Chesterton, "1914-1937: British Union Was Born In War." Action, November 13th, 1937, pp10-11.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 A.K. Chesterton, "Armistice - And A Thirteen Year Odyssey", op cit..
- 4 A.K. Chesterton, "Armistice and Time's Irony." Torquay Times, November 14th, 1930, p11. Chesterton also wrote in this article that: "such universal acceptance of slaughter, such grandure of response to the demands of Death, could not fail to leave the spirit of man upon the heroic plane for ever afterwards." "Journey's End - And the End of Every Man's desire." Torquay Times, August 30th 1929, p11.
- 5 B.N.M.L., Chapter 9, p1. The actual quote used in this thesis comes from a modified version of the autobiography which appeared in a journal from which the relevant pages were removed and deposited with the Candour Collection. Unfortunately the pages do not carry the name of the publication, or the date. But it is almost certainly taken from the Catholic publication The Word. Cf. the editor of this journal in the "Farewell To A.K." publication (Liss Forest, 1973) where he writes of an article published by him on "the Chesterton Brothers", which is the exact title of the article in question.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See below Chapter 4.
- 8 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chpater 5, p5.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., Chpater 6, p1.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p2.
- 14 Doris L. Chesterton, "Testimony of the Aunts". op cit., pp19-20.
- 15 B.N.M.L., Chapter 6, pp4-5.
- 16 Interview with Doris L. Chesterton, July 18th 1978, p3 of transcript. Chesterton would not relate this story himself, because later in life he came to be a staunch supporter of the Salazar regime in Portugal and was unwilling to do anything to make Portugal look ridiculous. In private, however, it was a favourite anecdote which Doris Chesterton heard often enough retold to remember the details clearly.
- 17 H.J. and R.E. Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa: 1850-1950, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1969, p280.
- 18 Ibid., pp276-280.
- 19 Norman Herd, 1922: The Revolt on the Rand, Blue Crane Books, Johannesburg, 1966, p13. Herd interviewed Chesterton for this work. Cf., Correspondence between Chesterton and Herd: Candour Collection/Uncatalogued.
- 20 H.J. and R.E. Simons, op cit., pp273-287.
- 21 Ibid., p281.
- 22 Ibid., p294.
- 23 Ibid., pp293-297.
- 24 Quoted by Brian Bunting in: The Rise of the South African Reich, Penguin African Library, Harmondsworth, 1964, pp34-35.
- 25 Ibid., p35.
- 26 Norman Herd, op cit., p21.
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- 28 Ibid.
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- 30 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 7, pp2-3.
- 31 Norman Herd, op cit., p143.
- 32 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 7, p5.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., pp6-8.
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- 37 A.K. Chesterton, The New Unhappy Lords, Candour Publishing Company, London, 1965, (back dust-jacket).
- 38 A.K. Chesterton, "Slim Jannie, You Are A Humbug." Action, September 8th, 1936, p9.
- 39 A.K. Chesterton, "Empire Day Tragedy." Action, May 21st 1936.
- 40 Cf., letter from Chesterton to Colonel A.B. Martin, 8 Roslyn, 173, Musgrove Road, Durban, S.A. (Undated, but in reply to a letter from Martin dated 11th December 1970).
- 41 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 8, p1.
- 42 Ibid. Chesterton writes: "The process was gradual and months elapsed before I became what I believe is now called 'hooked'. It did not take the form of habitual addiction: I was never a compulsive soaker. Although I would drink whiskey on most days and evenings, it never worried me in the normal course if I did not have a drop to drink. The pathological aspect of the wretched thing revealed itself in periodical 'jags', during which drinking did become compulsive." This conflicts with his earlier piece in All Aboard For Addis, written in the mid 1940s in which he associates his turn to drinking to the experiences of war. Cf., Chapter 2, pp19-20.
- 43 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 8, p2.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid. p3.
- 47 Ibid. p4.
- 48 Ibid. p5.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE AND FOUR

- 49 Ibid., p6.  
50 A.K. Chesterton, "1914-1937: British Union Was Born In War."  
op cit.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

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- 1 Taken from a testimonial sheet used by Chesterton in the  
1930s. VB - /Uncatalogued.  
2 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 9, p4.  
3 Ibid., Chapter 11, p1.  
4 Stratford Herald, May 8th, 1925, p6.  
5 Ibid., September 18th, 1925, p8.  
6 The Shakespeare Review, October 1928, pp389-391.  
7 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 11, p1.  
8 Ibid., Chapter 10, p1.  
9 Ibid.  
10 Ibid., p2.  
11 Ibid., pp2-4.  
12 Ibid.  
13 Ibid., pp3-4.  
14 Torquay Directory, March 18th, 1931, p5.  
15 Ibid., August 20th, 1930, p5.  
16 The Shakespeare Review, August 1928, pp235-238.  
17 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 10, pp5-6.  
18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid., Chapter 11, p4.  
20 Ibid.



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- 21 The Shakespeare Review, May 1928, pp3-5.
- 22 Ibid., September 1928, pp307-311.
- 23 Ibid., June 1928, p148.
- 24 Ibid., September 1928, pp307-311.
- 25/26 Little is known about this woman. Doris Chesterton retained contact with her until recently, but promised never to reveal her name to a researcher on Chesterton's life. It seems that she married happily after her affair with Chesterton and never revealed to her husband and children this former liason. There are various references to her in the Torquay press and there is one photograph of her with Chesterton in the Torquay Times of the 30th December 1932 where she is referred to as "Mrs. A.K. Chesterton." In deference to Doris Chesterton's wishes and because little would be gained by talking to her if she does not wish to recall this episode in her life, I have not made any further inquiries on the matter.
- For Chesterton's self-justificatory remarks Cf., B.N.M.L. Chapter 11, p5.
- 27 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 11, pp2-3.
- 28 The Shakespeare Review, July 1928, p161.
- 29 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 11, pp6-7.
- 30 A.K. Chesterton, Brave Enterprise: A History of the Stratford Memorial Theatre Stratford-upon-Avon, J. Miles and Co, London, 1934, Chapter VI, pp49-54.
- 31 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 11, p7.
- 32 Brave Enterprise, op cit.
- 33 Torquay Times, March 29th, 1929, p7.
- 34 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 13, pp1-2.
- 35 See especially the conflict of views between Chesterton and Gordon Craig and William Poel over the best way to present Shakespeare's plays to a modern audience - Stratford Herald, November 12th, 19th and 26th 1926; see also his attack on Sir Barry Jackson's theories of the stage in the same paper on December 30th, 1927. Finally, see his fierce debate with "A Lay Onlooker" on the question of religious observance: Stratford Herald, June 26th, July 3rd, July 10th, July 17th and July 24th, 1925.
- 36 Torquay Times, March 18th, 1932, p7.
- 37 Ibid., March 25th 1932, p7.

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- 38 Torquay Times, March 25th, 1932, p7.
- 39 Ibid., April 1st, 1932, p7.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, op cit., pp17-24.
- 42 Ibid., p52.
- 43 Interview with Doris L. Chesterton, July 18th 1978, p1.
- 44 Torquay Directory, May 27th, 1931, p10.
- 45 Torquay Times, May 29th, 1931, p7.
- 46 Ibid., July 3rd, 1931, p7.
- 47 Stratford Herald, Friday, December 31st, 1926, p2.
- 48 Torquay Directory, October 9th, 1929.
- 49 Doris L. Chesterton, Lowest Albert, unpublished novel manuscript in the possession of the authoress, Chapter XIII, pp182-187.
- 50 Torquay Times, May 9th, 1930, p6.
- 51 Notes sent to the author by Doris L. Chesterton and entitled "Kenneth on Holiday."
- 52 B.N.M.L., op cit., Chapter 13, p5.
- 53 Interview with Doris L. Chesterton, July 18th 1978, p3.
- 54 Stratford Herald, January 7th, 1927, p8.
- 55 Doris L. Chesterton, "Kenneth on Holiday", op cit., pp4-5.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Torquay Times, July 19th, 1929.
- 58 Torquay Directory, October 9th, 1929, p5.
- 59 Torquay Times, April 21st, 1933, p3.
- 60 Ibid., July 12th, 1929, p13.
- 61 Torquay Directory, May 31st, 1933, p5.
- 62 Ibid., May 22nd, 1929, p5.
- 63 Ibid., December 18th, 1929, p7.
- 64 a Cf., the manifesto of the Torquay Citizens' Defence League, printed in the Torquay Directory, January 29th, 1930, p5.

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- 64b Torquay Directory, January 29th, 1930, p7.
- 65 Ibid., March 26th, 1930, p3.
- 66 Ibid., July 16th, 1930, p3.
- 67 Ibid., January 21st, 1931, p3.
- 68 Interview with Doris L. Chesterton, July 18th, 1978, p4.
- 69 Torquay Directory, October 21st, 1931, p2.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Torquay Times, October 28th, 1932, p7.
- 72 Johannesburg Star, February 3rd, 1922.
- 73 Torquay Directory, May 29th, 1929, p5.
- 74 Ibid., June 5th, 1929, p5.
- 75 Ibid., February 18th, 1931, p5.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Torquay Times, February 3rd, 1933, p4.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 Torquay Directory, February 26th, 1930, p5.
- 80 Ibid., July 1st, 1931, p5.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Ibid., May 31st, 1933, p5.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 A.K. Chesterton, "The Chesterton Brothers" op cit. (See End Note 5, Chapter 3 above). Also B.N.M.L. Chapter 9, p4.
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- 3 Morris, John, A:"Fascist Ideas in English Literature" (Part 1) in Patterns of Prejudice, Vol 13, No4, July-August 1979, p22. Cf. also by the same author: Writers and Politics in Modern Britain, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1977.
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- 7 Benewick, Robert,: The Fascist Movement in Britain, Allen Lane, London, Chapter Six, "Leaders and Followers", passim.
- 8 Skidelsky, Robert, op cit, p346.
- 9 Harrison, op cit, pp25-26.
- 10 Cf., Harrison and Morris, op cit, passim.
- 11 Harrison, op cit, pp23-24.
- 12a Morris, op cit, (Part 2, Patterns of Prejudice, Vol 13, No5, September-October 1979.)
- 12b Skidelsky, op cit., p347.
- 13 Harrison, op cit., p15.
- 14 This paraphrase is borrowed from Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra. Cf. Wilson Knight, G. Christ and Nietzsche, London, 1948, p160.
- 15 Thurlow, Richard C. "Fascism and Nazism - no Siamese Twins." in two parts: Part 1 in Patterns of Prejudice, Vol 14, No1, January 1980; Part 2 in the same journal, Vol 14, No2, April 1980. See especially the second article, pp20-23.
- 16 Skidelsky, op cit., pp341-342.
- 17 Knight, G. Wilson. "The Poet and Immortality", The Shakespeare Review, September 1928.pp407-415.
- 18 Knight, G. Wilson. "The Principles of Shakespeare Interpretation." The Shakespeare Review, October 1928, pp374-380.

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- 19 Interview with Professor Wilson Knight at his home, Caroline House, Exeter, August 22nd, 1978, p1.
- 20 Letter from Wilson Knight to Chesterton and written at Dean Close School, Cheltenham, on 17th September, 1930. CC/Uncatalogued.
- 21 Letter from Wilson Knight to Chesterton, 2nd October 1930. CC/Uncatalogued.
- 22 Letter from Wilson Knight to Chesterton, 26th March 1931. CC/Uncatalogued.
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- 27 Knight, G. Wilson: The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy, Fourth Edition, Methuen, London, pV.
- 28 Ibid., p9-10.
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- 37 Ibid., p223.
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- 39 Ibid., p39.
- 40 Ibid., pp223-225.
- 41 Ibid., p231.
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- 45 Ibid., pp232-234.
- 46 Chesterton, A.K. "George Hayes: A Distinguished Hamlet." Reprinted in Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, op cit., pp 78-85.
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- 52 Ibid.
- 53 AKC: The Johannesburg Star, February 3rd, 1922, p6.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 AKC: Torquay Directory, May 29th to June 19th, 1929.
- 57 Ibid. June 5th, 1929, p5.
- 58 Ibid. June 12th, 1929, p5.
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- 60 Stern, op cit., p132.
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- 63 AKC: The Shakespeare Review, May, 1928, pp6-9.
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- 65 Carlyle, Thomas. On Heroes and Hero Worship, Ward, Lock and Bowden, London, 1900, pp142-143.
- 66 Wilde, Oscar: The Collected Works, Collins, London, 1971, p1034.
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- 68 The Stratford Herald, July 24th, 1925, p8.
- 69 Ibid. April 30th, 1928, p8.
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The Chesterton papers are held in three locations. The bulk are held by the Candour Library at the home of Miss Rosine de Bounevialle - Forest House, Liss Forest, Hampshire. Quite a number of papers and documents are held by Mr. Aidan Mackey of Vintage Books, Bedford. Finally, Chesterton's widow, Mrs Doris L. Chesterton, retains some material and many books from his private library, in her flat in Croydon. None of this material has been catalogued. Chesterton was a rather disorganized person. In a letter to his secretary in 1967 he writes: "It will not surprise you if I tell you...that I am not the tidiest mortal alive where papers are concerned. Indeed you have yourself likened the litter to a poultry yard at moulting time..."(Candour Collection).

Miss de Bounevialle and Mr Mackey have kindly opened all the Chesterton papers to me. Most of the material is in the form of correspondences and published and unpublished articles. The most important works are his unpublished autobiography, written between 1966 and 1973; a notebook intended for the rough-draft of the early chapters to that work; a play entitled Man Possessed written in 1938-39 and never published; a rough draft of his memoirs of the Abyssinian Campaign during the Second World War, entitled 'All Aboard For Addis: A Personal Record of the Campaign in Abyssinia and Somaliland'; the rough draft of several articles on William Joyce, intended for publication by the Sunday Express in 1953.

The Chesterton papers do not, however, contain a great deal of material from the pre 1945 period. The Chestertons suffered a fire at their London flat in 1933 which destroyed most of Chesterton's private papers (including his most prized possession - a copy of R.C. Sherriff's Journey's End, with a lengthy personal dedication to him). Added to this is Chesterton's wish to forget his association with Mosley and the BUF after it had collapsed with such rancour early in 1938. Nor was Chesterton anxious to recall a period in his life when he had written some of the most appalling anti-Semitic attacks in language which led to his association with men like William Joyce and Hitler in the popular (and later academic) memory of the period.

Nevertheless some important documents remain amongst the private papers and these have proved most useful to this study. But the bulk of the correspondences are for the post 1953 period. This material, although not often of any use in this thesis, remains in my possession, and it is my intention to produce a full biography utilizing these documents in the near future.

Mrs Doris Chesterton has been most helpful. Apart from giving me a good deal of time to interview her, she has constantly put any extra thoughts that have occurred to her into letter form and dispatched them to me. She also kindly read each chapter in rough draft form and never attempted to alter my arguments, even when they were highly critical of her husband's decisions and opinions. Indeed, she was kind enough to recognize the problems

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associated with the writing of biography:

"A Biographer's task is so much more difficult than a novelist's. If you are inventing a character you can make him act consistently. A real character never does, and the biographer is bound to stick to devotion to the truth. The closer you get to a person the more bewildering he seems. But through the haze first impressions often prove to be right. Kenneth's character was more full of contradictions than most. An honest effort to get to the truth must be baffling at times. But I think you'll manage it - as far as any man can understand another...In a way you seem to know Kenneth better than I do..." (letters to the author: 28/2/79 and 13/2/79).

Whether Mrs Chesterton is right about my own efforts is for others to judge, but she is certainly correct about the problems of dealing with an individual's contradictions and attempting to emerge with a credible person to show the world.

Two pieces written by Mrs Chesterton have proved of very great use. One is a novel which she wrote in 1938-39 entitled 'Lowest Albert', in which she describes her early impressions of Chesterton when she met him in the late 1920s. The other piece was written by Mrs Chesterton shortly after her husband's death in 1973, in the belief that Mr Aiden Mackey was about to write a biography of her husband. It is a forty page document based upon many years of discussions with Chesterton's aged aunts, who knew her husband as a child. It is entitled 'Testimony of the Aunts'. Thanks to her gifts of expression Mrs Chesterton has managed to paint a useful sketch of his childhood experiences which, when used alongside Chesterton's own memories of the period, proved invaluable in compiling the early chapters of the thesis.

Few of Chesterton's friends and colleagues from the inter-war period are still alive. Only one person who knew him before the Fascist period could be traced. This was Professor G.R. Wilson Knight who granted me a most useful interview and made further helpful comments in later correspondences. (The Chesterton papers also contain several most interesting letters from Knight to Chesterton in the early 1930s.)

Unfortunately, approaches to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre library have drawn a blank as far as documents signed by Chesterton are concerned.

The Mosley Secretariat in London were also of little use. Several attempts on my part to obtain an interview with Sir Oswald produced what seemed to be a positive response, but on each occasion my hopes were disappointed. (There remains a deep suspicion within the Mosley Movement about Chesterton because of his traumatic break with Mosley in 1938 and his subsequent attacks on Mosley in print).

The lack of personal papers relating to the period under discussion in this thesis has made the task of interpretation more difficult than it might otherwise have been. But a mass of descriptive material is a poor substitute for a proper



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biographical analysis which must be based upon an interpretive account, both of the man and his historical circumstances.

### Published Primary Sources

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From his first pieces of journalism in 1922 until his death in 1973 Chesterton produced a seemingly endless stream of articles, pamphlets, books, plays and short stories. What follows represents the most important portion of that output.

1922-1933

Articles for:	<u>The Johannesburg Star</u>	1922-23
	<u>The Stratford-upon-Avon Herald</u>	1924-28
	<u>The Torquay Times</u>	1928-33
	<u>The Torquay Directory</u>	1929-33
	<u>The Shakespeare Review</u>	1928

In addition he published Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, a book of dramatic criticism, published by T. Werner Laurie, in 1931; and Brave Enterprise: A History of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, published by J. Miles and Co, in 1934.

1933-1938

Chesterton contributed articles to all the major organs of the BUF Press:

The Fascist Week  
The Blackshirt  
Action  
Fascist Quarterly  
British Union Quarterly

He also edited both Blackshirt and Action. He produced three pamphlets for the Movement:

The Apotheosis of the Jew: from Ghetto to Park Lane (British Library date, 1937).  
Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary (n.d.)  
Fascism and the Press (n.d.)

He wrote the foreword to the British Union Pictorial Record, (1937). But his largest publication of the period was his official biography of his leader: Oswald Mosley: Portrait of a Leader, (1937).

1938-39

During this period he produced his pamphlet Why I Left Mosley (n.d.) and contributed articles to The People's Post, The New Pioneer, and The Weekly Review.

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1944-1953

He produced two novels during this period:

Juma The Great (1947)  
Commissars over Britain (1948)

A play of his was published:

No Shelter For Morrison (1944)

(He published this under the pseudonym Caius Marcius Coriolanus.)

Together with his Jewish friend Joseph Leftwich he produced a book on the Jewish question:

The Tragedy of Anti-Semitism (1948)

He contributed articles throughout the period to various anti-Semitic journals including London Tidings, and The Weekly Review, and The Word (an Irish Catholic journal). He also had articles published in The West Country Magazine.

From 1944 until 1953 he was deputy editor and chief leader writer of Truth.

He also produced several pamphlets during this period:

Menace of Money Power: An Analysis of World  
Government by Finance (1946)  
Britain's Alternative (1946)  
The Money Power (1947)

During 1953 he spent nine months as Lord Beaverbrook's literary adviser and personal journalist, and ghost wrote Beaverbrook's book Don't Trust To Luck (1954). He contributed a few articles to the Daily Express, Sunday Express, Sunday Times and Evening Standard.

1953-1973

In October 1953 Chesterton began his own views-sheet Candour published continuously for the remainder of the 50s and then intermittently through the 60s, and early 70s until his death. Chesterton was the mainstay of the journal and wrote well over a thousand three page leader articles in it, apart from other notes and special pieces. (The Journal is now continued by Miss Rosine de Bounevialle).

From 1953 until 1958 Chesterton contributed a regular piece on 'the international situation' in the Journal of the Royal United Services Institution. (A staggering thought, given his beliefs!)

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He produced many pamphlets based on his Candour writings and expressing the official view of his own political pressure group The League of Empire Loyalists (founded in 1954), including:

Sound the Alarm! A Warning to British Nations (1954).  
Britain Faces the Abyss (1955)  
Tomorrow: A Plan For the British Future (n.d.)  
Britain's Graveyard: Dangers of the Common Market (1963).  
B.B.C. A National Menace (1972)

In 1965 he produced his major 'theoretical' work, based on his extensive reading of the tradition of conspiratorial literature: The New Unhappy Lords (Candour Publishing Co, London).

His last work, an extended pamphlet of 118 pages (originally intended as a full length book) entitled Facing the Abyss was published posthumously in 1976, with the final two chapters added after reference to his original manuscript.

Contemporary Newspapers and Periodicals.

The Manchester Guardian 1933-1939  
The Times 1933-1939  
The Jewish Chronicle 1933-1939

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