Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936)

A happy childhood in a happy home laid the foundation for Gilbert's sane and sensible outlook on life. As a little boy he read fairy tales; as a big boy he wrote and illustrated them, some of which are preserved in his book The Coloured Lands.

Gilbert first attended Colet Court School, entering St. Paul's as a day student when he was twelve. The reports on him for his six years there (1887-92) were that he was a good boy but an indifferent student, a dreamer, interested chiefly in drawing and English literature. In his "dramatic journal," kept irregularly from his sixteenth year, he dramatized scenes from Scott and burlesqued portions of Shakespeare. He later acknowledged the strong influence on his youthful formation made by the Junior Debating Club, of which he was chairman. It met weekly at the home of one of its dozen teenage members and, following tea, one of them read a paper which was then debated. In the issues of its organ, The Debater, his first prose and verse were printed; his essays on Milton, Pope, Gray, Cowper, Burns, and Wordsworth being noteworthy. In his last year at St. Paul's (1892), he entered a competition for a prize poem (on St. Francis Xavier), and won it. From 1892 to 1895 he studied art at the Slade School and during part of the time he attended lectures on English literature at University College. A fellow-student whose family controlled the publishing firm of Hodder & Stoughton gave him some art books to review in the firm's monthly, The Bookman. And upon leaving Slade, he entered the office of a publisher of spiritualistic literature and later the office of the general publisher, Fisher Unwin. There he began to write Greybeards at Play as well as to revise, edit and counsel the works of others.

At St. Paul's Gilbert formed lifelong friendships with the future writer Edmund C. Bentley and with Lucian Oldershaw. In 1896 Lucian was courting Ethel Blogg (anglicized from Blogue) and took Gilbert with him to call. At first sight he fell in love with her sister Frances and, after a courtship extended by his then meager earnings, they were married in 1901. It was Lucian who, in 1900, also introduced the twenty-six-year old Gilbert to the thirty-year-old Belloc. Their reciprocal influence was lifelong as was their friendship.

In 1899 Gilbert began writing for The Speaker, a Liberal weekly. His first book, a volume of comic verse which he also illustrated, Greybeards at Play, was successfully published in 1900; later that year, his father financed publication of his second book, The Wild Knight and Other Poems. But it was his brilliant though unpopular pro-Boer stand on the Boer War which first brought him to public attention, and by 1901 he also was writing regularly for The Daily News. His third book, The Defendant (1901), comprised some of his essays from The Speaker, and is suffused with paradoxes, a literary form which has since been associated with his name. ("I did not acquit Chesterton of paradox," wrote his great admirer Msgr. Knox, "but, after all, what was a paradox but a statement of the obvious so as to make it sound untrue?"

He prided himself on being a journalist, and much of his work was first published in the popular journals of the day, many of his books being collected and edited from these essays, and much more of it has never been collected at all.

In 1904, Sir Oliver Lodge invited him to become a candidate for the Chair of Literature at Birmingham University, but he declined. The invitation was doubtless extended on the strength of his books on Browning and on Dickens. The success of the latter was such that he was requested to write a series of prefaces to all of Dickens' novels.
At the time of his marriage he believed in the basic Christian religious truths but in no particular religion. His wife was a convinced Anglo-Catholic, and she was particularly pleased when in 1905 he accepted an invitation to be the first of a series of lay preachers in St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden.

From this time on there was an almost constant stream of lecture engagements far and wide and to almost every type of organization—religious, literary, social, and even political. He was famous, he was wanted, and he couldn't say no. His wife became his secretary recording times, places, subjects, and arranging itineraries. He became so pressed for time that he had to write at odd moments and to do his newspaper essays at deadline. This constant pressure extended from 1904 to 1908. He was notoriously absent-minded. Typical was the telegram he sent his wife when he was en route to give a lecture: "Am in Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?~' He hated physical exertion as much as he revelled in mental activity.

In 1909 he and his wife moved from Battersea, London, to the suburban town of Beaconsfield, which was to be their home for the rest of their lives. Their desire for children was never to be fulfilled; later they adopted Dorothy Collins who had become Gilbert's secretary in 1926. At Overroads, their Beaconsfield home, he was removed from the bustle and bars of Fleet Street and had more leisure for his friends: Max Beerbohm, Jack Phillmore, Msgr. O'Connor, Maurice Baring, Bello c, George Wyndham, Msgr. Knox, and a host of others. But his social life did not detract from the stream of his books, as witness The Ball and the Cross, What's Wrong With the World (changed by his publishers from What's Wrong? and in which he formulated his sociology), Alarms and Discursions, and Blake (all published in 1910), Criticisms and Appreciations of Dickens, The Innocence of Father Brown, and, what many deem his greatest writing, The Ballad of the White Horse (all published in 1911). Too, his interest in politics, which he had had from boyhood, became more active: he began by fighting the sale of peerages as a means of secretly raising party funds, and continued blasting every other form of political corruption. Of necessity this interest included social reform, public education, a free press, etc. He resigned from the Liberal owned Daily News (a property of Cadbury of Cadbury's Cocoa) to write for the Daily Herald. He doubtless resigned just before being asked to, for his recent statements regarding the Liberal party leaders included: "Some of them are very nice oldgentlemen, some of them are very nasty old gentlemen, and some of them are old without being gentlemen at all." And again, "The best of His Majesty's Ministers are agnostics, and the worst are devil worshippers." This hit hard because at least nominally Church of England men (some ecclesiastics) were the predominant rulers of the realm.

Gilbert's books in this period included Manalive (1911), A Miscellany of Men, essays (1912), The Victorian Age in Literature (1913), The Wisdom of Father Brown (1914), and The Flying Inn (1914). His poetic play, Magic, was produced in England in October 1913, and in Germany soon afterward. And following a conversation with Msgr. O'Connor on the subject, he wrote his best known single poem, "The Ballad of Lepanto" (1912).

Gilbert went on a lecture tour to Palestine (which became a determining factor in his conversion) in 1919, to Italy in 1920, and to the United States in 1921-22 and again in 1930-31. From these travels came The New Jerusalem (1920), What I Saw in America (1922) and Sidelights on New London and Newer York (1932). His American tour included a series of thirty-six lectures on Victorian literature and history at the University of Notre Dame (his poem "The Arena" commemorates his visit), as well as talks delivered at San Francisco, Omaha, Oklahoma City, Nashville, New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Boston, and other cities.

Gilbert's brother Cecil had become a Catholic shortly before going to war and Gilbert himself had been forming a Catholic mind slowly but steadily from about the same time. But he was not one to be hurried and fortunately even his closest friends, Maurice Baring and Ronald Knox (themselves converts), though
he acknowledged their influence upon him, did not try to hurry him. Eventually it was Father O'Connor who received him into the Church in 1922. On the same day he wrote his celebrated poem "The Convert." By her own conscience his wife followed him into the fold four years later.

Despite the yearly loss by the paper and his constant charity to the needy, from panhandlers to causes, Gilbert helped to build the Church at Beaconsfield, until then a mission of High Wycomb parish. It became his memorial.

In 1926 were published *The Outline of Sanity, The Catholic Church and Conversion, The Incredulity of Father Brown* (as Gilbert said to Father Rice, "My publishers have demanded a fresh batch of corpses"), and *The Queen of the Seven Swords*; in 1926, his Collected Poems, *The Return of Don Quixote* (which first appeared serially in G.K.'s Weekly), *Robert Louis Stevenson, The Secret of Father Brown*, and a play, *The Judgment of Dr. Johnson*. Like his *Magic*, it was successful as literature, not as theatre. The Father Brown detective stories brought him charter membership in the Detection Club (1929) and soon afterwards its presidency.

He spent a month of 1927 in Poland, a nation whose true place in Europe he held high. Two years later his visit to Rome resulted in *The Resurrection of Rome* (1930). His more successful books of this period were his Catholic essays, *The Thing* (1929), and the two volumes of general essays, *Come to Think of It* (1930) and *All Is Grist* (1931), and his reflections flowing from the Eucharistic Congress which he and his wife attended in 1932, *Christendom in Dublin*, his studies of *Chaucer* and of *St. Thomas Aquinas*. Of this last, Etienne Gilson, a foremost Thomistic scholar, said: "I consider it as being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas. And P'ere Gillet, O.P., MasterGeneral of the Dominican Order, lectured on and from it to large meetings of Dominicans.

While in Rome, Gilbert interviewed Mussolini and had an audience with the Holy Father. In 1934 he was elected, honoris causa, to the Athenaeum Club. Both he and Belloc were invested as Papal Knight Commanders of the Order of St. Gregory with Star. At his death in 1936 the Holy See cabled Cardinal Hinsley: "Holy Father deeply grieved death Mr. Gilbert Keith Chesterton devoted son of Holy Church gifted Defender of the Catholic Faith. His Holiness offers paternal sympathy people of England, assures prayers dear departed, bestows Apostolic Benediction."

The panegyric was delivered in Westminster Cathedral by Msgr. Ronald Knox. His monument was designed by Eric Gill and burial was at Beaconsfield. His wife survived him by a little more than two years.

He had employed his great God-given gifts with humility and charity; indeed these two virtues characterized his life.

Books on him are numerous: first in time and also very important is *G. K. Chesterton: a Criticism* (1908), published anonymously but later learned to be by his brother Cecil; Belloc's brief but brilliant *The Place of Chesterton in English Letters* (1940); *Father Brown on Chesterton* (1937) by Msgr. John O'Connor; *The Laughing Prophet* (1937) by Emile Cammaerts is concerned more with the man than with the writer; *Chesterton As Seen by His Contemporaries* (1939), includes material by Gilbert himself, edited by Cyril Clemens; *Gilbert's Autobiography* (published posthumously in 1936), in which, with characteristic humility, he seems bent upon writing about everyone but himself; and the definitive biography, *G. K. Chesterton* (1943) by his long-time friend, Maisie Ward (Mrs. Frank J. Sheed)