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Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton*. Review by Travis Buchanan The Journal of Inklings Studies Vol. 2, No. 2, date 2012

Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton*.
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Appropriately perhaps for a biography of the larger-than-life figure, the first thing one notices about Joseph Pearce's *Life of G.K. Chesterton* is its impressive size. Its 522 large pages make it over twice the length of Chesterton's own *Autobiography*. We mustn't judge a book by the size between its covers, but if the width of the book's spine leads the reader to expect a serious study of Chesterton, he may be disappointed.

On 23 November 1996 *The Sunday Telegraph* was surely right to call this book (first published in 1996, reissued in this version in 2004) 'a fresh reminder of how good Chesterton could be'. However, this praise is due to the lengthy quotations from Chesterton's works generously (almost haphazardly) strewn throughout, and not to any special analysis or insight into his writings given by Pearce. Of course Pearce deserves credit for their inclusion and arrangement in the book, but having compiled so many words of the great man of letters it is disappointing that Pearce did not use them better in marshaling any consistent analysis or explanation of Chesterton's ideas, which made him the singular thinker and writer that he was.

Even so, Pearce asserts in the Preface that 'it was in the depths of his philosophy and not in the speed of his wit' that Chesterton's 'genius resided' (p. vii). Pearce successfully displays Chesterton as a 'radical thinker' (p. viii) whose insights provided not only piercing analysis of his own time but remain prophetically relevant for ours as well. This is illustrated in his presentation of Chesterton's prescient insight into, for example, the looming future conflicts between Germany and the rest of Europe, as well as the Arabs and Jews in Palestine. However, Pearce's professed goal of laying bare 'the depths of his philosophy' remains mostly unrealized, for he fails to offer anything approaching a penetrating analysis of Chesterton's thought or philosophy. In fact, the abundance of block quotations significantly disrupts the flow of nearly every chapter, so that the reader is left struggling to discern Pearce's own voice or the method of his study. The biography therefore reads primarily as a chronological organization of Chesterton's more

memorable quotations. This makes interesting reading certainly, but holds little value as an explanation of Chesterton's thought or philosophy. It is regrettable therefore that he chooses to spend the bulk of his time establishing the context of Chesterton's writings at the expense of any reasonable attempt to examine their content. If to do one of these well a biographer must sacrifice the other, it appears then that Pearce has chosen the greater of two evils: especially in a study which aims to reveal the deep reservoirs of interconnected knowledge concerning history, theology, philosophy, politics, and many other areas of human culture underneath the incisive wit of such a prodigious literary figure.

Two more minor grievances also bear mentioning. Firstly, it is bothersome that in such a lengthy study of Chesterton many references to quotations terminate at a secondary source such as another biography or study, and are not traced to the original. Secondly, this grievance is compounded by the publisher's choice to reference sources in endnotes instead of footnotes. Especially due to its large size, frequently having to thumb through hundreds of pages to find the source to one of the many quotations filling the chapters is unnecessarily laborious and distracting.

What Pearce does offer the reader is a chronological progression through GKC's life and writings. In this his energy is spent reconstructing the various life-settings from which Chesterton's work and thought arose, and in doing so always seems to prefer anecdote over analysis. The result is the reader is guided into the circumstances surrounding, but not the substance of, Chesterton's penetrating thought. If we are to be sympathetic to Pearce's study, then his book is worth reading for anyone interested in Chesterton's life and personality, as its greatest virtue is its focus on key relationships GKC held with others — outstandingly with his wife Frances (a neglected focus in previous studies); his brother Cecil; Catholic influences and friends such as Hilaire Belloc, Maurice Baring, and Fathers Vincent McNabb, Ronald Knox and John O'Connor; and of course his great intellectual sparring partners Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. Such a chronological approach as Pearce takes through GKC's publications and relationships may help the reader to trace the intellectual and spiritual development of his mind and philosophy; however, Pearce's commentary on such development is sorely lacking and leaves the reader to tie together the tangled threads from lengthy quotations with insufficient assistance from the biographer.

In the end, what Pearce delivers to the reader is made more transparent when it is learned that — like Chesterton — Pearce was an adult convert to the Roman Catholic Church whose conversion was greatly influenced by the writings of Chesterton himself. It seems not unreasonable to see this as the reason why Pearce's study reads

more like a tribute piece from a grateful follower than a critical or even particularly insightful presentation of *A Life of G.K. Chesterton*, as the book's subtitle claims. Pearce redeems all of Chesterton's faults, and so comes off more as admirer than biographer. It may be that in this study — the first in a long line of Pearce's post-conversion books — he is repaying a personal debt of praise to a type of spiritual father. If this is indeed the case, it is unsurprising that Pearce not only chose Chesterton as the topic of his first post-conversion publication, but that he understands the 'faith' of this portly genius to be 'absolutely central to his life and to an understanding of his character' (p. x). And despite Pearce's own great spiritual debt to Chesterton, in this he is not misled. Especially when viewed together with certain key relationships like those with Belloc, O'Connor, Knox, Baring, McNabb and others, Chesterton's life journey and career might well be understood as a journey to and through Rome. The spiritual journey may be best described by Chesterton himself, who — ever the poet — once asked, 'If seeds in the black earth can turn into such beautiful roses what might not the heart of man become in its long journey towards the stars?' (p. xi).

Finally, as regards the main title, *Wisdom and Innocence*, Pearce does well to highlight these two qualities as central to the personality and writings of this distinguished man of letters. Brilliantly and memorably depicted by Chesterton in his sleuthing priest, Father Brown, these characteristics are ones Pearce returns to again and again throughout his study. With repeated emphasis Pearce shows that, though engaged in some of the most controversial topics of his day, Chesterton uniquely embodied — in a way that Belloc, for example, though equally embroiled in controversy, did not — the unlikely combination of shrewd wisdom and dove-like innocence that Jesus commended for those who would follow him: 'Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matt. 10:16).

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