

Introduction

Ian Boyd, C. S. B.

In an issue of our journal, which highlights the agrarian theme, Thomas Jefferson is the figure who looms most large. America, as Chesterton once said, is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. And it was Jefferson who spelled out that creed in a remarkable constitution. But the agrarian philosophy Jefferson developed represents an equally remarkable achievement. Its defense of the small property owner gives Jefferson the right to be called a proto-Distributist.

This was not the only reason why Chesterton admired him. Hostility to financial elites is something else, which the two men had in common. The anti-mercantilism of both Jefferson and Chesterton is a feature of their common affection for an agrarian life. In this regard, Ewa Thompson's review of a book concerning John Crowe Ransom and the Southern Agrarians provides a valuable foot-note and corrective to the Jefferson piece. Dr. Thompson draws attention to the often neglected historical question of the problems, which develop when various people have conflicting claims to the same land. Jefferson and Chesterton celebrated the ideal of a society based on widely distributed property, and the rhythm of life that is characteristic of such a society. It is true that the slavery that was the basis of the Agrarian South caused Jefferson to tremble, remembering that God is just; but it is equally true that the slavery of Northern industrial America, and of a good part of the rest of the Western world, had the same effect on Chesterton. Also, as he pointed out there was an important difference between the two slaveries: by the mid-nineteenth century, Southern slavery had reached its final and decadent stage and was therefore unlikely to continue; but because industrialism was historically a relatively new phenomenon, it represented a deadly future threat to the agrarianism dear to the Distributist heart of Chesterton.

Beara Peninsula, County Kerry, Ireland

In his book *What I Saw in America*, Chesterton's admiration for the agrarian South of Jefferson is best expressed by his praise for Jefferson's Virginia. He writes:

Long ago I wrote a protest in which I asked why Englishmen had forgotten the great state of Virginia, the first in foundation and long the first in leadership; and why a few crabbed Non-conformists should have the right to erase a record that begins with Raleigh and ends with Lee, and incidentally includes Washington. The great state of Virginia was the backbone of America until it was broken in the Civil War. From Virginia came the first great Presidents and most of the Fathers of the Republic. Its adherence to the Southern side in the war made it a great war, and for a long time a doubtful war. And in the leader of the Southern armies it produced what is perhaps the one modern figure that may come to shine like St. Louis in the lost battle, or Hector dying before holy Troy.

The article about Pieper and the importance of leisure also recalls Chesterton's reflections on life in America. Although he described America, in a famous phrase, as a nation "with the soul of a Church," he expressed deep misgivings about the American cult of work as a good for its own sake, independently of its role as a preparation for contemplation. The talk he gave in Albany New York on December 5th, 1930 during his second tour of the country was devoted to this topic. In his opinion, if laziness was the characteristic fault of the English, frantic activity was the characteristic fault of the Americans. In this regard, the articles by Maciej Wąs on the Personalist Nationalism of Chesterton and Mathew Steem's article about Chesterton and leisure make a similar point.

The final articles about Flannery O'Connor and St. Thérèse of Lisieux draw attention to the religious faith which gave unity to the lives of the American Southern writer and the French saint. Flannery O'Connor did not of course share the Protestant religious faith of the people of the American South about whom she lived and wrote; but, like St. Thérèse, she regarded religious faith as the only subject worth serious discussion. She might smile at the incidental absurdities of the Bible Belt of the American South, but she never failed to regard with affection and deep respect the Christian faith of its inhabitants.

Introduction

As for Chesterton and St. Thérèse, it must be admitted that she was a saint more admired by Chesterton's wife Frances than by him. Nevertheless, it is significant that the last of the couple's many foreign travels brought them to France for a pilgrimage to Lisieux. The pilgrimage had a Chestertonian appropriateness, since the Normandy saint's doctrine of the "little way" has many curious similarities to Chesterton's Distributist philosophy. Like Thérèse, he believed that heaven was to be found and gained among ordinary things and ordinary people. The advice he gave in one of his final BBC radio broadcasts, shortly before his death on June 14th, 1936, echoed the Teresian doctrine. "One must learn to be happy," he explained, in "those quiet moments when you remember that you are alive." If that is done, he believed, even death, was unable to destroy the essential joy of the Christian. As he explained, in a poem entitled "The Skeleton," reprinted in the London *Tablet* shortly after his death, death should be regarded as a game of "Hide the Slipper" that a loving God plays with the person he has created. In the final words of the poem, the skeleton, which seems to be smiling in its grave, says:

No; I may not tell the best;
Surely, friends, we might have guessed
Death was but the good King's jest,
It was hid so carefully.

So too, in spite of the great suffering which marked the final days of St. Thérèse's life, she would certainly have approved of Chesterton's comparison of death to a game a loving father plays with his child.



On the cover: Drawing of G. K. Chesterton by Polish artist Piotr Prominski was presented as a gift by the artist to the G. K. Chesterton Institute for Faith & Culture on the occasion of the 2012 Chesterton Conferences in Poland. (www.prominski.com)

The colour version of drawing is by New Jersey artist Tony Capparelli, Adjunct Assistant Professor Fashion Institute of Technology (NY), and Adjunct Professor at Seton Hall University (NJ). (www.tonycapp.com). Mr. Capparelli is a long-time friend and supporter of the Chesterton Institute.