

Chesterton's Tavern

**A GREAT WRITER'S THOUGHTS ON
LIFE AND THINGS OF WISDOM**

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Advance Praise for *Chesterton's Tavern*

The tavern plays an important role in the history of literature, theology and ideas. *Chesterton's Tavern*, as appropriately portrayed by historian Kevin Belmonte, is a homely place, comfortably situated for a refreshing and truly restorative introduction to the wisdom, wit, and remarkably relevant vision of Gilbert Keith Chesterton.

Belmonte's short but satisfyingly deep draft of vintage Chesterton can help us see that the essayist, critic, novelist, poet and popular theologian is for the ages. This book captures how Chesterton somehow carries no less than the wonder and secret of the universe in his farsighted yet down-to-earth paradoxes, parables and observations.

—Colin Duriez, author of *The Oxford Inklings*
and *Tolkien and Lewis: The Gift of Friendship*

Kevin Belmonte has given us, in this slim yet robust volume, a warm welcome to join a conversation *in medias res* at the Fleet Street Tavern with that master of conviviality, G.K. Chesterton.

To Malcolm Guite . . .
for memories of tavern time in Hamilton,
and the treasured gift of a 1935 copy of *G.K.'s Weekly*,
once part of Dorothy Sayers's library . . .

I cannot remember when I first met Chesterton. I was so much struck by a review of Scott's *Ivanhoe* which he wrote for the *Daily News* [in 1901]...that I wrote to him asking who he was and where he came from, as he was evidently a new star in literature.

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

[Chesterton] is the only one I know who has the gift of Samuel Johnson.... One wants to hear what he has to say on any subject.

—GARRY WILLS

Chesterton's a classic.

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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Preface

Chesterton's times were much more like our own
than we imagine.

—WILLIAM ODDIE

The idea for this slender book owes more than a little to Alister McGrath's fine, discerning, and instructive text *If I Had Lunch with C.S. Lewis*.¹

The following pages tap the same conceit, save one difference . . .

This book imagines several "Fleet Street Tavern" meetings with Chesterton, circa 1912—a series of once-a-week dinners with him, holding forth in the evening, much as Samuel Johnson used to do at London's Mitre tavern.

Chesterton greatly admired Johnson, and sometimes appeared in Johnsonian costume—always with great relish. They were in many respects kindred spirits: richly enjoying fine tavern fare, trenchant conversation, and thoughtful reflection. Among the most revealing literary compliments Chesterton ever paid was one bestowed on Johnson, who, he said, could "walk into the heart without knocking."²

Chesterton, as a man of letters, was one of the early twentieth century's famous public intellectuals, and a journalist with a brilliant mind. The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw was one contemporary to acknowledge his genius, while the American writer

1. *If I Had Lunch with C.S. Lewis: Exploring the Ideas of C.S. Lewis on the Meaning of Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2014).

2. Quoted in Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), 232.

CHAPTER ONE

At Once Old and New

The first of the intellectual beauties of the Book of Job is that it is all concerned with this desire to know the actuality; the desire to know what is, and not merely what seems.

—FROM CHESTERTON'S INTRODUCTION TO
THE BOOK OF JOB (1907)

As we enter Fleet Street Tavern on the first evening, going to a backroom table flanked by high-back settles, we see Chesterton is already *in medias res*, in fine animated talk with a friend nearby about a favorite subject: Charles Dickens.

“But we have a long way to travel,” Chesterton is heard to say, “before we get back to what Dickens *meant*: and the passage is along a rambling English road, a twisting road such as Mr. Pickwick travelled.” Here he pauses for emphasis, then continues with a knowing look:

But this at least is part of what [Dickens] meant; that comradeship and serious joy are not interludes in our travel; but that rather our travels are interludes in comradeship and joy, which through God shall endure forever. The inn does not point to the road; the road points to the inn. And all roads point at last to an ultimate inn, where we shall meet Dickens and all his characters: and when we drink again it shall be from the great flagons in the tavern at the end of the world.¹

Then, with a quick rap of his sword-stick on the stout oak floor, Chesterton concludes, “And there, my good sir, you have it. What would be better!”

1. *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1906), 300. Emphasis added.

CHAPTER TWO

Mere Chronology

To have known the things that from the weak are furled,
Perilous ancient passions, strange and high;
It is something to be wiser than the world,
It is something to be older than the sky.

—FROM “THE GREAT MINIMUM” (1915)

From the start of our second dinner gathering at Fleet Street Tavern, it seems clear that Chesterton wishes to pick up right where he left off at the close of the first evening. Since that gathering was largely devoted to a plea for sound philosophical thinking, or the place reflections about ultimate things should have in our lives, he would say we also need to guard against the siren song of “mere chronology.”

What is “mere chronology,” we might ask?

Chesterton could tell us that in a column for the *Illustrated London News*, he had written, “I find some old thoughts that are also true, but which are so old that many modern people had dropped them, *merely because they were old.*”¹

That is, people were spurning ideas on the basis of mere chronology alone. Or, to put it another way, there was a growing disdain for any notion of timeless truth and wisdom—something much to be regretted.

And yet, Chesterton would say, there is more to consider: an ever-growing fascination with what could be called “new thought.” Once more, he could tell us, he’d written about this in the *Illustrated London News*, addressing it directly with a cogent question, couched in Mark Twain-like wit:

1. “What Is the New Thought?,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 29, *The Illustrated London News: 1911–1913*, ed. Lawrence J. Clipper (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1915), 458.

CHAPTER THREE

**What Does Progress
Look Like?**

Somebody wants a Wiser Age, . . .
And grey with dust is Dante's crest,
The bell of Rabelais soundless swings;
And the winds come out of the west.

—FROM "A BALLADE OF A BOOK-REVIEWER"

(1908)

At our third Fleet Street Tavern gathering, it would not be surprising for Chesterton to voice some as-yet-unspoken concerns about “the cult of the future.” One word was ever present in current discourse: *progress*—all the more troubling as such talks seemed untethered to any kind of agreement on first principles.

Chesterton described this scenario by saying,

The case of the general talk of “progress” is, indeed, an extreme one. As enunciated to-day, “progress” is simply a comparative of which we have not settled the superlative. We meet every ideal of religion, patriotism, beauty, or brute pleasure with the alternative ideal of progress—that is to say, we meet every proposal of getting something that we know about, with an alternative proposal of getting a great deal more of nobody knows what.¹

Clearly, Chesterton saw that definitions matter.

Further, it’s important to describe progress in ways worthy of our allegiance. Properly defined, progress has “a most dignified and legitimate meaning.”² By its very name, he said, progress “indicates a direction.”³

1. *Heretics*, 35.

2. *Heretics*, 35.

3. *Heretics*, 36.

However, “used in opposition to precise moral ideals,” the word *progress* is ludicrous. “Nobody,” he said, “has any business to use the word ‘progress’ unless he has a definite creed.”⁴

Here was the gist of it all. “I do not . . . say,” Chesterton wrote,

that the word “progress” is unmeaning; I say it is unmeaning without the previous definition of a moral doctrine, and that it can only be applied to groups of persons who hold that doctrine in common. Progress is not an illegitimate word, but it is . . . a sacred word, a word which could only rightly be used . . . in the ages of faith.⁵

Each of these cautionary thoughts about progress, Chesterton would say, are essential. They provide much needed clarity, highlighting ways in which progress, or our *perceptions* of it, can be misdirected. For tetherless perceptions of progress were a great dilemma of his time. “Here,” as he stated,

comes in the whole collapse and huge blunder of our age. We have mixed up two different things, two opposite things. Progress *should* mean that we are

4. *Heretics*, 35–36.

5. *Heretics*, 37.

CHAPTER FIVE

**The Sage of
Relics and Rumours**

Or sane and sweet and sudden as a bird sings in the
rain—

Truth out of Tusitala spoke and pleasure out of pain.

Yea, cool and clear and sudden as a bird sings in the
grey,

Dunedin to Samoa spoke, and darkness unto day.

—FROM “TO EDMUND CLERIHEW
BENTLEY” (1907)

In a column Chesterton wrote for the *Illustrated London News*, dated October 1908, he cast something of an unlikely writer in the role of a sage: Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. At the outset of our fifth gathering at Fleet Street Tavern, he could tell us about this.

But first, a bit of background about Defoe and his famous book.

Published in 1719, *Robinson Crusoe* is one of the world's great adventure tales. Chesterton wrote about the book, and its author, many times. *Robinson Crusoe*, he believed, was a book with timeless wisdom for some of the great questions and concerns in life. His essay in the *Illustrated London News* explained this.

Many thought Defoe's book a vivid adventure of the sea, and faraway lands. Chesterton understood this, and richly enjoyed the book on that level. Yet at the same time, he looked to something more: *Robinson Crusoe* was great literature, and he could count the reasons.

First, Chesterton parted from those who considered Defoe's book *solely* an adventure tale. Its larger themes gave it a place of far greater import.

Defoe's narrative, he wrote,

is not a story of adventure; rather it is a story of the absence of adventure—that is, in the first and best

CHAPTER FOUR

To Find the Eternal

A word came forth in Galilee, a word like to a star;
It climbed and rang and blessed and burnt wherever
brave hearts are.

—FROM "A WORD" (C. 1910)

To start our fourth Fleet Street Tavern gathering, a question might well arise as to just what Chesterton meant when he said, “Orthodoxy . . . is the natural fountain of revolution and reform.”¹

Here, he’d marshaled his well-known gift for paradox; but smiling at this, he would welcome the chance to explain his phrase.

Eternal verities, he would say, are the essence of orthodoxy. And when he discovered this, he wrote that the dogmas of Christianity “are far more fantastic, and, perhaps, far more beautiful than we think.”²

During his years as an art student, Chesterton had nearly been overwhelmed by scepticism and despair. Thinking himself “a lost soul,” he barely “hung on to the remains of religion.”³ At last, he thought to re-examine Christianity. It proved a journey to “a convincing creed,” written with “wonder and an idea of welcome.”⁴

All within a faith two thousand years old.

“One searches for truth,” he remembered, “but it may be that one pursues instinctively the more extraordinary truths.”⁵ That was his story.

1. *Orthodoxy*, 257.

2. *Heretics*, 303–304.

3. *Autobiography* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936), 94.

4. *Orthodoxy*, viii, 16.

5. *Orthodoxy*, 18.