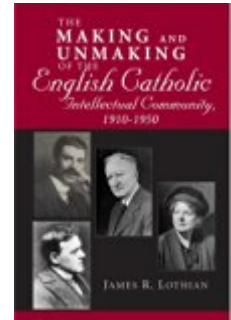


James R. Lothian. *The Making and Unmaking of the English Catholic Intellectual Community, 1910-1950.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009. xxiii + 487 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-268-03382-8.



Reviewed by Dermot Quinn

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James R. Lothian's important new book considers the English Catholic world of the first half of the twentieth century as many English Catholics might have wished it to be considered—small but culturally significant, confident but inveterately quarrelsome, patriotic but with a strangely ambiguous loyalty both to Rome and to home. His cast of characters once commanded a following far beyond the flock: G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Christopher Dawson, Maisie Ward, Eric Gill, Evelyn Waugh, and Father Vincent McNabb. Of these, only Chesterton and Waugh are now widely read or even known. Belloc has appeal to grumpy contrarians, including this reviewer, who enjoy his prose and his pose, the first muscular and elegant, the second pugnacious and iconoclastic. Most historians hardly take him seriously at all. Ward, formerly admired as the famous daughter of a famous father, is only remembered nowadays by Chestertonians, admittedly plentiful, who haunt secondhand bookstores and know each other by arcane references, by way of Ward, to their hero's early life. Dawson, an enor-

mously influential historian in his day, has gone the way of most indispensable gurus: a dollar a paperback, ten dollars the lot. McNabb, an Irish Dominican who loved, he said, Ireland as his mother and England as his wife, is loved in return in both countries, but by numbers diminishingly small and by people whose idea of high fashion is the hair shirt. Gill, a superbly gifted sculptor, has not recovered from Fiona McCarthy's hammer and chisel of a biography twenty years ago, which reduced his reputation to rubble. Here is a community, to adopt Lothian's terminology, that seems rather thoroughly to have unmade itself. The question is how it ever gained ascendancy in the first place.

In crucial ways, as Lothian sees it, Belloc is the key to the story. For one thing, he was Chesterton's mentor and friend, shaping that extraordinary intellect in deeply radical ways. From Belloc, Chesterton acquired his view of English history, his political vocabulary, and his economic thought. From Belloc, as if he needed much prompting, he discovered a taste for rollicking

polemic. From Belloc, he conceived a perverse enthusiasm for lost causes: distributism, restoration of the Stuarts, opposition to welfare, hostility to eugenics legislation, that kind of thing. (The two even went so far as to think that the party system was corrupt, that parliament was stacked against ordinary people, and that human beings should not be disposed of if they were weak or somehow inferior. How odd.) From Belloc, in other words, Chesterton adopted a lively, engaging, splenetic, high-spirited antimodernism that had huge appeal to the broader mass of English Catholics in the interwar years.

To be sure, this is caricature, but plausible enough to be persuasive. Politically, Belloc now seems not only *contra mundum* but also, at times, positively unpleasant. “At last the brains and manhood of the nation,” he said, welcoming Benito Mussolini, “could stand it no longer, and all that crowd which the later nineteenth century had known to nausea, the ‘advanced’ journalist, the high-brow reformer, the Earnest Woman, the militant socialist, the party fund banker, the inevitable Jewish cabinet minister, the pimp-secretary, were swept away into the common rubbish heap” (p. 61). Too much of this strong meat will turn most stomachs after a while; and Lothian, with his knack for finding the damning quotation and ugly remark, will convince many of a certain malignity in this flawed but brilliant figure. His treatment of him, while admirably cogent, seems also oddly conventional. Dutifully, he is convicted of anti-semitism, of “egregious short-sightedness” in his support for Italian fascism, of “bigoted refusal” to accept Jews as English, of “deep-seated animosity” toward “cosmopolitan financiers,” and so on (pp. 63, 66, 68). These are serious charges and not without some color, as even Belloc’s contemporaries acknowledged. Sometimes, though, the rhetoric seems overblown (in curious mimicry of its subject), the argument circular. Thus Belloc’s distinction between Jews and “Jewish interests” cannot be dismissed as “a typically anti-semitic

trope,” as if the defense against anti-semitism is somehow further proof of it (p. 68).

This is, perhaps, to quibble. On the more substantial question of Belloc’s larger significance on English Catholic thinking, Lothian is certainly persuasive. It was his misfortune, a late Victorian and Edwardian, to live beyond the Second World War; to survive long enough, that is to say, to see his romantic medievalism and otiose Jacobitism turn to dust and ashes as a governing philosophy for his coreligionists and his fellow countrymen. Belloc was a triumphalist who was also in love with failure—a decidedly odd, but very Catholic, combination. In 1910, he was fighting parliamentary plutocracy and the early stages of the welfare state. A generation later, who would have given a penny for such preoccupations? By then, Winston Churchill, another romantic monarchist, could only defeat Adolf Hitler by the greatest centralization of the state that Britain had ever seen. William Beveridge was about to unveil a national health service in which the government would provide everything from gripe water to false teeth. The commanding heights of the economy were soon to be captured by mousy Clement Attlee. The king across the water was George Marshall. Bonny Prince Charlie looked a lot like Harry Truman.

It took such a figure as Dawson to ease English Catholics away from their Bellocian fantasies toward accommodation with such a world. Dawson was no fan of modernity, but he saw, as Lothian notices, that “parliamentary democracy, far from being unChristian, was a direct outgrowth of Christianity” and that medievalism, although in some respects economically and spiritually attractive, was also historically problematic (p. 374). This passed for liberal thinking in mid-twentieth-century English Catholic circles. Dawson was also a superbly equipped historian, his mind subtle where Belloc’s was trenchant, his faith deep (as was Belloc’s) but also capable of distinguishing between Christendom and Christ. He was the bridge,

between the wars and beyond, to a new way of being an English Catholic. Many of his coreligionists, even those who have never heard of him, remain in his debt today.

Lothian's examination of this rich and complex community is impressively researched, solidly written, engaging argued, and, in sum, full of fascination. He is to be commended on his achievement.

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