

# G.K. Chesterton's Visit to Buffalo

By Karen Brady

**T**ickets were \$1.50, a third off for students—and all seats were reserved for 1930's heralded Buffalo, New York, appearance of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, the man deemed "England's supreme literary genius."

No one, arguably, was more excited than my late father, Charles Andrew Brady—then a youth of 18 and already Chesterton fanatic. He was not only a sophomore at the Jesuit-administered Canisius College, host of the event, but he had approached the powers-that-be to ask if there was any way he could get to meet, and perhaps interview, the great author.

"Would you be willing to pick him up at the train station?"

Absolutely! Never mind that my father, at 18 and in the early months of the nation's Great Depression, had no car. He simply borrowed one (most likely from my venturesome Great Aunt Kathryn "Kate" Dowd, early social worker, child welfare pioneer and one of the first women in Buffalo to drive an automobile).

Four decades later—in his "Canisius College: The First Hundred Years"—my father recalled the moment when "Gilbert Chesterton alighted, with his curious elephantine combination of clumsiness and grace, from a train under the echoing iron shed of the old Lehigh Valley Station, shepherded by his diminutive wife, a congressman's hat perched on the mop of iron-gray curls that always made G.K.C. look like an operatic brigand, dropping paradoxes equal to those he would toss off that night in his Canisius-sponsored lecture."

In another remembrance, my father described Chesterton arriving "beneath the echoing glass-roofed dome of the

Lehigh Valley terminal. As he clambered from the Pullman, I had the sudden conviction that he would seem much more appropriate dismounting from a stage coach..."

But it was the distinguished author's diminutive wife—Mrs. Frances Blogg Chesterton—and not her acclaimed spouse, who was clearly in charge, my father often said, suggesting that Chesterton himself was so lost in thought, he may never have known, without her, that the train was pulling into Buffalo. (My father later called Mrs. Chesterton "the patient little wife of genius" and saluted her for



Charles Brady in 1981

"her recording angel's loving, self-sacrificing and necessary utility" in his review, in the national Jesuit weekly, *America*, of Maisie Ward's 1952 book, *Return to Chesterton*.)

It was November 19, "a wintry night," when the Chestertons arrived for the Canisius lecture. My father was to whisk the pair, in his borrowed automobile, to

their downtown lodgings—but, first it seems, there was the unforeseen matter of placing a gentleman of Chesterton's girth into said car.

"There was difficulty getting him in," Canisius College professor of English emeritus, Richard J. Thompson, remembers my father telling him. "They literally had to push him in."

My father put it this way: "The man's bulk is immense. His paunch, if it be not sacrilegious or irreverent to say so, is epic. And yet, for all of that, there is nothing gross about him. He is tall and broad as well as fat, standing a good two inches over six feet, with a leonine head and clear, kind eyes. One might term him a transcendental mixture of Pickwick's jolly corpulence and the majestic stature of Charlemagne. Bigness is probably the best word to describe this quality—bigness both physical and mental. Perhaps this bigness of heart and soul is his outstanding characteristic."

Soon, my father and his eminent cargo arrived at their first destination:

"Of course there were a hundred and one reporters jockeying for position when we reached the hotel," he wrote in a page-one story—GILBERT K. CHESTERTON SAYS CATHOLICITY FITS ANY LIFE—of the February 1931 issue of the then-prominent Jesuit periodical, *The Queen's Work*. Its subtitle—NOTED AUTHOR TALKS TO CANISIUS SODALIST—told of my father's further good fortune.

Indeed! Despite the throng of newspapermen-in-waiting, my father was granted a private interview: "Through the kind instrumentality of the Rev. Rudolph J. Eichhorn, S.J., president of Canisius College, I managed to procure an interview of some thirty minutes before the

barriers burst and the gentlemen of the press came surging in."

Before he could ask his first question, however, Chesterton insisted "that we both be seated before he would take a chair," my father wrote. "So, with Mrs. Chesterton to guard the outposts, I delved for pad and pencil and commenced operations."



Catholicism and Chesterton's conversion to the faith were at the heart of my father's queries, including his initial, "How do you think the Catholic Church fits into modern life?"

Before replying, Chesterton "took off his glasses and began polishing them abstractly. 'Why,' he answered slowly, 'it's the only thing that fits into any life.'"

Next, "What would you say was the Church's special duty toward the twentieth century? 'It should take over the whole job,' he answered without hesitation."

Other questions concerned the many notable hats Chesterton wore: "Which side would turn uppermost?" my father speculated. "Chesterton the medievalist or Chesterton the modern journalist? Chesterton the knight of old who sang ("A Christmas Song for Three Guilds") or Chesterton the modern knight, who tilted with the monsters of cant and hypocrisy?"

The question itself was unadorned: "If you had had a choice, would you prefer to be born during the Catholic Middle Ages?"

For a moment, "the great man was puzzled: 'No one can imagine himself entirely different or in entirely different circumstances,' he hedged. Then a twinkle danced in his eye. 'I've heard that question propounded at several banquets. Everyone who answered it, answered with reservations. One gentleman answered

that he'd have liked being born in King Canute's era—with tea. Another that he'd have preferred entering the world under Edward the Black Prince—with bridge. Personally, I'd have liked the Middle Ages—with detective stories."

Chesterton "punctuated his remarks with quick, nervous gestures, pausing at intervals to mop his forehead," according to my father who also asked him, "What character of history do you most admire?" Like a bolt from the blue flashed back the answer, edged with a typical Chestertonian barb of wit: 'St. Francis of Assisi—if he needs my suffrage.'"

In his history of Canisius College, my father also recounts asking Chesterton his opinion of the "survival values" of H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. "Though he remained loyal to his great good friend, Shaw, G.K.C. remarked that Mr. Wells might have made a tactical error in thinking so consistently about the future, since the future was a fickle chime-ra and might not repay the compliment."

Mention was made, too, of authors Aldous Huxley, John Masefield, and Chesterton friend and frequent collaborator, Hilaire Belloc, before Mrs. Chesterton had to hurry young Mr. Brady out of the hotel room "so that G.K.

might at least see the other interviewers and, for once, arrive on time for the lecture he was scheduled to give."

At that point, recounted my father, "the avalanche descended. The gentlemen of the press had arrived—with a bang. One officious camera man set Mr. Chesterton against the wall; his colleagues stood in readiness, magnesium flare in hand. Reporters surrounded the great man. They invested him; they concealed him."

All to my father's chagrin—as he had one more question: "I suppose I looked rather down at the mouth standing there and gazing disconsolately at my unanswered question. Mr. Chesterton must have thought so, too, and once more he knelt at the tiny feet of My Lady Courtesy, for I felt him touch my arm gently, and peer over my shoulder at number eight on my list: 'After these years since your conversion we seem to feel that your enthusiasm for the Church is increasing? Is that true?'"

"His great finger tapped the paper with decision. 'Yes. Certainly,' said Mr. Chesterton. He smiled as we shook hands, and turned back wearily to his other interviewers."

Thompson, my father's longtime

### New Chesternitions—E

+ **eccentric**: something that is somehow, at once, crazy and healthy. (*New Witness*, Mar. 1, 1921)

+ **egoist**: someone who has no creed, no cause, no conception of truth which he thinks more important than himself. (*Illustrated London News*, Nov. 3, 1928)

+ **elephant**: a monstrosity with his tail between his eyes. (*The Bookman*, November, 1902)

+ **encyclopedia**: a rather jerky and bewildering account of the adventures of a comic person called Man. (*New Witness*, Sept. 17, 1914)

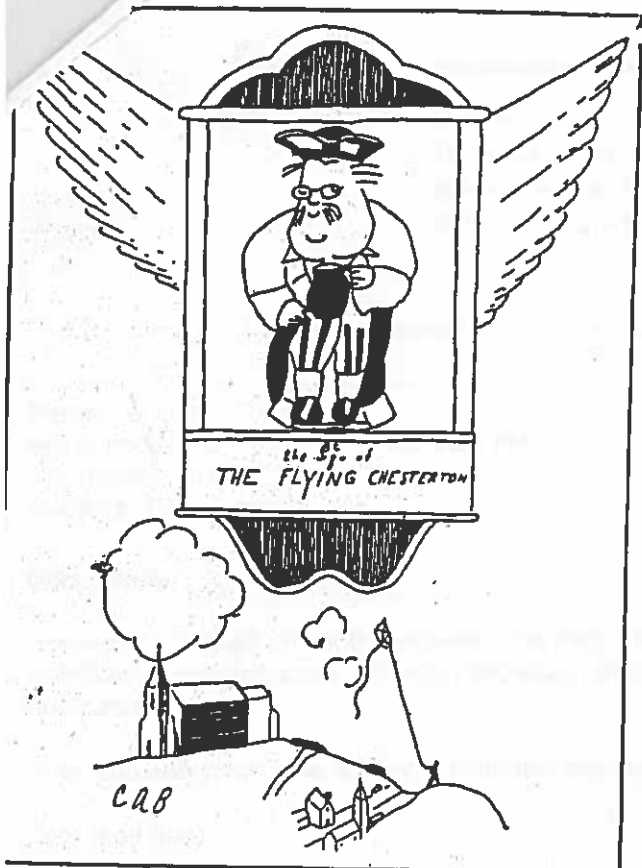
+ **essay**: a man talking without taking the trouble to tell a story. (*Daily News*, Oct. 31, 1908)

+ **evidence**: stuff written down or sworn to, or spoken by an enormous number of different kinds of men. ("Do Miracles Happen?" *Debate*, Jan. 19, 1914)

+ **evil**: the unpardonable sin of not wishing to be pardoned. ("How to Be a Uniter," *Autobiography*)

+ **expert**: one whose main object is to prevent anybody else being an expert. (ibid. *Illustrated London News*, Sept. 14, 1912)





The earlier Chesterton, summed up as an inn, soars over the later Chesterton, summed up as a cathedral.

beginning to be," Thompson posits. "They were a match."

Indeed, as you may have guessed, my father went on to become an author himself—a poet, novelist, critic and, for more than forty years, a professor of English at Canisius College. C.S. Lewis initiated a correspondence with him. The Poetry Society of America, awarded him its first prize in 1968; its Cecil Hemley Memorial Award for best poem on a philosophical theme two years later.

Charles Andrew Brady also became a caricaturist, capturing authors he read in his own pencil and ink renderings—Gilbert Keith Chesterton among them—each caricature signed with the initials CAB.

I often think now that the "wintry night" when Gilbert Keith Chesterton came to town—to speak in Buffalo's old Elmwood Music School, under the auspices of the Canisius College alumni, and to receive an honorary doctor of literature degree from the college—had more than a little to do with my then-18-year-old father's own life's trajectory.

As for Chesterton, he went on to Buffalo's packed Music Hall, once part of an armory, and began his 1930 lecture (as reported by then-Canisius senior Victor Lootens) with words apt both then and, eerily, now:

"I believe that in this vast hall, my figure must be almost entirely invisible. But by the instrumentality of science, my voice will not be entirely inaudible. I have been, as the scientific term goes, amplified, and you will suffer the alarming results of that scientific process.

"I believe that I have to address you, I will not say upon the subject, but under the title of 'Culture and the Coming Peril.' Since I suggested that title, a great many things have happened. For one thing, I have forgotten what I meant by it, and for another, insofar as I still remember what I thought about the coming peril, I can only say that the coming peril has come." <sup>22</sup>

aching colleague, remembers my father feeling that, if it weren't for Chesterton's stiff schedule, the two of them "would still be there":

"Chesterton was garrulous and learned and Charles was

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