Chesterton's Ballad of the White Horse: From Conception to Critical Reception

Nicholas Milne
University of Ottawa

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol35/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.
Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*: From Conception to Critical Reception

**Abstract**
Follows Chesterton's development of the idea of using King Alfred and the Battle of Ethandune as the core of a long poem on England and Englishness, and examines how the poem was received by contemporaries, fared in later criticism, and influenced other writers.

**Additional Keywords**
Chesterton, G.K. The Ballad of the White Horse (poem)
INTRODUCTION

As August of 1911 drew to a close, the first copies of G.K. Chesterton's The Ballad of the White Horse began to hit the stalls in England. The romantic verse epic of King Alfred the Great—just under twenty-seven hundred lines of rhymed ballad stanzas, putting it somewhere between Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight for length—was the product of nearly a decade of sustained creative effort on the part of its author, unprecedented at the time, for him, and never again to be repeated by a man more accustomed to writing four or five books a year in addition to hundreds of essays, articles, letters and poems. The Ballad was also the first of Chesterton's poetry published in book form since the modestly-successful volumes—Greybeards at Play (1900) and The Wild Knight (1900)—of ten years earlier.

Though few would have known it at the time, for Chesterton himself there was much at stake. While the previous year’s biography of William Blake was well-received and his work of social criticism, What’s Wrong With the World, had made a provocative splash, the Ballad had become for Chesterton a very personal work. Into it he had poured his passions and his hopes, the substance of his dreams and the urgings of his friends. It was a labor of love for things both great and small. Most significantly of all to Chesterton, the Ballad was very important to his wife, Frances, and so became to its author a sort of icon of the love they shared. If James Stephens is right in his suggestion that “poetry is a very private matter”—and in his criticism that Chesterton was ignorant of this fact (Stephens 66)—then what a heart it must have been that Chesterton laid bare to the reading public in those late summer days.

The substance of the Ballad is described easily enough: Alfred the Great (840-899), the Saxon king of Christian Wessex, rallies his troops for their last desperate stand at Ethandune against the invading pagan Danes in 878. The cause seems hopeless; the poem begins with Alfred already having been defeated once, and the Danes, under the war-king Guthrum and his three savage earls, Ogier, Harold and Elf, seem poised to conquer Wessex completely. In the moment of his greatest despair, Alfred is confronted with a vision of the Blessed Virgin, who will not comfort him with a prophecy of victory, but rather only affirms to Alfred that the coming time will be hard and that the just cause must...
always be upheld (I.209-61). Thus encouraged, Alfred calls together his three chiefs, Eldred the Franklin, Marcus the Roman, and Colan the Celt, bidding them join a possibly doomed enterprise for the greater glory of God. All three agree, in their differing ways, and so Alfred and his motley horde hurl themselves once more upon the Danes, suffering many setbacks and defeats. But when things seem at their darkest, the Virgin is seen again, and with one last rush the Wessex men lay their enemies low and win the day (VII.189-370). The victory is not a permanent one, but it is a victory, and thus both Alfred’s subjects and the newly-baptized Danes face an uncertain future that looks very much like our present.

It is a work of heavy philosophy and message, and the sheer weight of Chesterton’s desired point sometimes overwhelms the poetry being used to express it. Though it is an historical work, it is not historical in the generally accepted sense, tending rather towards the legendary and the mystic than the purely factual. Chesterton is aware of this himself, though, and admits as much in his prefatory note to the Ballad: “It is the chief value of legend to mix up the centuries while preserving the sentiment; to see all ages in a sort of splendid foreshortening. That is the use of tradition,” he concludes; “it telescopes history” (xxxvi).

It is a work with both rhyme and meter, eschewing some of the more experimental methods of the period, and is devoted to issues of war, religion, and the ongoing struggle to preserve civilization from collapse. It met with great acclaim when it was published, grew in popularity over the years that followed, impressed itself upon the memories of figures both scholarly and political, and was itself a sort of last stand against the modern trends it so explicitly and implicitly countered. Its reputation today has dropped off considerably; neither the long-form ballad nor the Christian epic continues to command the same respect in the world of poetry that it once did, and as an example of early twentieth-century poetry the Ballad has now been thoroughly eclipsed by the works of the Modernists on the one hand and the First World War poets on the other.³

---

¹ All parenthetical citations from the Ballad are taken from the 2001 Ignatius edition prepared by Sr. Bernadette Sheridan, with each citation conveying the Book number in Roman numerals and the Line number(s) in Arabic.
² This same year of 1911 also saw the publication of, for example, Ezra Pound’s Canzoni, Guillaume Apollinaire’s Le Bestiaire ou Cortège d’Orphée, and Léon-Paul Fargue’s Tancrède.
³ The Ballad nevertheless remains quite popular among Chesterton’s fans, and one may see vestiges of it here and there in other places as well. Christopher Hollis’ autobiography, Along the Road to Frome (1958), takes its title from Chesterton’s preface, for example, while no fewer than three works—Fr. Trevor Huddleston’s religious history Naught for Your Comfort (1956), Christopher Derrick’s essay collection Joy Without a Cause (1978), and
The latter is especially significant, I think; the Ballad had the misfortune of attempting to establish a tone for battle poetry on the threshold of a conflict that would upend the genre entirely. Its reputation would hold during the war’s early years. It was known among the infantrymen; Joseph Pearce notes, for example, that it “was carried by many in the trenches for both comfort and inspiration” (Pearce, Literary 106). Most poignantly of all, a letter received by Chesterton in the early months of the war tells the tale of at least one copy of his poem that would never be read again. “I want to tell you,” wrote the widow of a drowned sailor, “that a copy of the Ballad of the White Horse went down into the Humber with the R.38. My husband loved it as his own soul—never went anywhere without it” (Ward, Gilbert 199). Such stories aside, the war’s progress 4 Chesterton’s other great war-song, “Lepanto” (1911), was also a favorite during the First World War; Pearce mentions a note Chesterton received from John Buchan in 1915, for example, informing him that he had heard infantrymen shouting passages from “Lepanto” over the wire to boost morale (Pearce, Literary 106). It is not surprising that a poem like the Ballad of the White Horse should prove an attractive thing to a nation—and a people—at war. As Charles Williams argues at length in his essay on Chesterton in Poetry at Present (1930), Chesterton is, of all the modern poets, “the only one whose verse is always full of the voice of battle […]. There are drawn swords from the first page to the last, material, intellectual, and spiritual” (Williams 97). In the case of the Ballad this is particularly apt, with small moral parables being offered up concerning everything from the man-sized sword of the Wessex farmer-chief Eldred (II.90), which breaks and betrays him at last (IV.48-51), to the thrown sword of Colan the Celt that opens the battle of Ethandune (V.246-300). When a nation is at war and fighting for its life, there are things that must be said—things that the nation’s people want and need to hear—that cannot be said properly but through art, and most typically the art of the struggle. Maurice Baring comes very close to this matter in his review of the Ballad, seeing within it another instance of the message that pervades many of Chesterton’s other works: “that Jack kills the giant.” Although Alfred is initially beaten by the Danes, “in his moment of defeat something is kindled in him, he does better than his best, and he wins” (Baring 274). 5 The Ballad’s considerable afterlife during the Second World War is also worth considering, but lies somewhat beyond this article’s expressly contemporary scope. In addition to appearances in major newspapers like the London Times on the occasions of the fall of Crete and the victory at El-Alamein, it held considerable importance for at least one young man who would eventually become a major author of fantastical works and Christian apologetics in his own right. For C.S. Lewis, then, and a “young friend […] just about to enter the R.A.F.,” [the Ballad] was something even less definable; “in those quaking days after the fall of France […] [we] found ourselves quoting to one another stanza after stanza of the Ballad. There was nothing else to say (“Period” 151). Given that Lewis would become “a popular broadcaster whose talks would play a valuable part in sustaining British morale during the darkest hours of the [second world] war” (Sayer xviii), his recognition of the Ballad’s similar function is not without merit.
and aftermath left something like the *Ballad* very much less suited to modern ideas of combat and martial enterprise than were the works of newly popular poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon or Robert Graves.

In spite of this collapsed reputation, however, the *Ballad* was the subject of lively critical debate upon its publication and even while it was still being prepared. In the pages that follow, I consequently address myself to two tasks: to synthesize what we know about the development and publication of the *Ballad* from the various incomplete accounts that exist, and to provide a comprehensive overview of the period's contemporary critical response to the epic. In doing so, I will engage with the question of what we may call, for a lack of better terms, Chesterton's "success" or "failure" with the *Ballad* as a project. In crafting the *Ballad*, Chesterton aimed to foster a renaissance of legend in an age given to demythologization, and the response of the critical establishment shows that this provocative bolt found its target.

**GENESIS**

Before proceeding further, it would first be worthwhile to consider the milieu into which Chesterton's *Ballad* was being introduced. Although dwarfed, in comparison, by poetic and literary treatments of the exploits of King Arthur, Alfred is by no means solely represented by the *Ballad* in the field of art devoted to him. The earliest such work that comes down to us is likely *The Life of King Alfred* (c. 888 A.D.), a biography of sorts written by Bishop John Asser of Sherborne, though its authenticity remained a matter of controversy even in Chesterton's day. The centuries that followed Alfred's death saw a strong tradition of heroic deeds and episodes spring up surrounding the Wessex king, with the burning of the cakes and the playing of the harp being among of the most popular.

Of the works from the period running up to Chesterton's *Ballad* there are two that deserve special mention as possible inspirations, or at least as forebears that can be considered in a similar light. The first of these is the 1839 poem "Alfred the Harper," by the little-remembered John Sterling. "Alfred the Harper" bears much resemblance to Chesterton's *Ballad*, in a formal sense, with the familiar rolling quatrains and lyrical thrust, but the editorial stance is

---

6 Joanne Parker has noted that "between 1902 and 2000, fewer than forty Alfredian texts were published—while works of Arthurian literature numbered in the thousands" (205). Indeed, Chesterton himself turned to Arthur as a poetic subject frequently, producing "The Ballad of King Arthur" (c. 1920), "The Myth of Arthur" (1923) and "The Grave of Arthur" (c. 1930), among others. Nevertheless, none of these matched the scope of the *Ballad of the White Horse*. In addition to Parker's historical treatment of the *Ballad* in terms of Alfrediana, see also David Horspool's *King Alfred: Burnt Cakes and Other Legends* (2006) and Michael Alexander's *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (2007).
somewhat different. Sterling’s work relates the memorable tale of Alfred’s infiltration of the Danish camp in the guise of a minstrel to sing before Guthrum, high chief of the Danes. Ordered to sing of the glory of the Danes, Alfred does just that—he sings of the glorious immortality in song and story that awaits every man sitting around that fire after he inevitably falls in battle. The song, it must be said, does not boost morale. Chesterton’s own treatment of the episode (the whole of Book III: “The Harp of Alfred”) sees Alfred listen to songs played by the three Danish chieftains, and one by Guthrum himself, before he begins his own, and the whole affair is treated as a sort of philosophical debate rather than a mischievous trick. And for all that, too, Alfred’s song in the Ballad is quite different, being an eloquent statement of the Christian position in the face of that of the Danes, who propose worldviews ranging from the nihilistic to the libertine.

It seems likely that Chesterton was familiar with Sterling’s poem, given his wide-ranging literary tastes and the similarity in tone, language and form. Chesterton addresses Sterling’s career explicitly while commenting on Thomas Carlyle’s biography of the forgotten poet, a portrait “all the more vivid to us because it is all that is left of Sterling. He was […] exactly one of those men who can only live in memory, but who in memory are very living” (“Some Fellows” 222-23).

A further hint of this familiarity—and potentially even indebtedness—can be found in another of Chesterton’s poems entirely. First, from Sterling:

“This land has graves by thousands more
Than that where Regnar lies.
When conquests fade, and rule is o’er,
The sod must close your eyes.
How soon, who knows? Not chief, nor bard;
And yet to me ’tis given,
To see your foreheads deeply scarred,
And guess the doom of Heaven.” (113-20)

Compare those last four lines with these from Chesterton’s “The Last Hero” (1901):

To see this fair earth as it is to me alone was given,
The blow that breaks my brow to-night shall break the dome of heaven.

(35-36)

The identical rhymes and references to the cleaving of the head make for a most uncanny resemblance. One may admit of the possibility of a coincidence, but it does not seem likely.
The other work that deserves some consideration as an inspiration to Chesterton in developing the *Ballad of the White Horse*, though to a lesser degree, is a novel from 1886. The prolific boys’ adventure novelist, George Alfred Henty (1832-1902), related some of the exploits of King Alfred in *The Dragon and the Raven: The Days of King Alfred*—the Battle of Ethandune and the conversion of Guthrum among them. As with Sterling’s poem it is difficult to assert, absent any explicit testimony to that effect, that Chesterton was familiar with the book in question, but it is nevertheless the case that Chesterton’s love of boys’ adventure stories (most notably saluted in his marvelous essay, “The True Romance”) was enormous, and he would have been at just the right age in 1886 (twelve) to enjoy the novel when it was first published. Chesterton’s familiarity with and affection for the works of Henty are elsewhere affirmed in “On Historical Novels,” a short essay included in his 1920 collection, *The Uses of Diversity*, in which he praises Henty’s “industry and fecundity,” whereby many a boy’s imagination was taken “into many and varied parts of human history, however conventional the figure he followed through them might be” (“Historical” 182). Those “many and varied parts of human history,” rather than the few and indisputable parts doled out by his era’s scientific historians, are precisely the sort Chesterton defends in his prefatory note to the *Ballad*.

In contrast to many of Chesterton’s other works, which were often written in a quick and haphazard manner, the production of the *Ballad of the White Horse* is rather what Garry Wills has called “the only example in his career of such extended labor and delayed publication.” He continues:

> The first two lines of the finished poem were the inspired opening of a poem on Moses. One of Alfred’s prayers had come to Chesterton in his sleep, and was copied down, in the first person, many years before the ballad appeared.7 We can see the changes made in one section of the ballad by comparing it to the “Fragments of a Ballad of Alfred” published in the *Albany* for 1907, four years before the publication of *The White Horse*. (Wills 38)

The first inklings of the *Ballad* in progress can be tracked through the recollections of Father John O’Connor, the model for Chesterton’s Father Brown, whose first adventures were published in the same year as the *Ballad*. Their friendship was such that Fr. O’Connor was treated, in 1903 or 1904, to substantial excerpts from what Chesterton’s wife Frances called “the Epic in contemplation [...] a deal [of which] was already composed” (O’Connor 30) and

---

7 The stanza, as it appears in the *Ballad*, is found at V.76-81.

8 T. Fisher Unwin’s *Albany Review*, which ran from 1904 to 1908. Chesterton worked as a manuscript reader at the Fisher Unwin publishing company from 1896 to 1902.
it seems that he may also have had an indirect hand in some of the poem’s content. It came as something of a shock to Fr. O’Connor when it was to him that Chesterton entrusted the final draft for appraisal and (apparently) revision in July of 1911: “I was confused, and then transfused with sober delight, when one July evening at Overroads, Beaconsfield, he put the whole MS. of the Ballad into my hands, and Mrs. Chesterton explained that I was to censor it, as so much of mine was in it” (67). If Fr. O’Connor redacted or altered the Ballad in any way after having been so entrusted with its manuscript, however, no evidence of it remains to us.

Chesterton continued to use elements of the Ballad-in-progress for other things in the years leading up to its publication, combining research for the poem with pleasure and productivity. His brother Cecil mentions, in G.K. Chesterton: A Criticism (1908), that Gilbert had published extracts from what Cecil referred to as a “Ballad Epic of Alfred” in The Daily News, with Cecil providing as an example a stanza that appears with some slight alterations in the finished version of the Ballad (C. Chesterton 237).9 Four essays (“A Romance of the Marshes,” “The White Horses,” “Ethandune” and “The Gold of Glastonbury”) in Alarms and Discursions (1910), “give evidence of [Gilbert’s] trips alone or with his wife to ‘the battle-places and hiding places’ of Alfred the Great. He was killing two birds with one stone” (Sheridan xix). The essays demonstrate many of the features that would soon after be found in the Ballad and its prefatory note, particularly when it comes to the essay “Ethandune.” The importance of that name to English history stands firm and unchallenged, Chesterton writes, in spite of the inability of any modern historian to determine where, exactly, it was. To discover it, one must allow to “toll in [one’s] ears the tone of the uncaptured name—Ethandune.” The thematic thrust of the Ballad is also on display, typified amusingly in his appraisal of how “Alfred was defeated by the barbarians again and again; he defeated the barbarians again and again; but his victories were almost as vain as his defeats. Fortunately he did not believe in the Time Spirit or the Trend of Things or any such modern rubbish, and therefore kept pegging away” (Chesterton, Alarms 114-15).

All of these varied productions, anyway, would seem to dispel entirely the unlikely story, still popular as an anecdote, that describes the Ballad as having been written in its entirety in a fortnight after a full stanza (V. 76-81) came to Chesterton in a dream. If there is any truth to the story at all, it likely lies in the bit about the stanza coming to him in a dream—but even this cannot properly be known. It is also possible that the story describes the production of the final draft to be presented to Fr. O’Connor in July of 1911; Chesterton was a notorious procrastinator, though his output was prodigious, and a frantic rush

---

9 The stanza appears at 1.214-18 in the finished Ballad.
to complete the thing might account for the story as it stands, as well as for some of the seemingly inattentive errors that can be found throughout the poem.

The Ballad's publication in 1911 brought relief for Chesterton and—as we shall see in a moment—excitement from the press. Chesterton was at the height of what A.L. Maycock has called his “great decade” of 1904-1914 (19), and expectations were high. The reaction of the man in the street to the Ballad is lost to us, though its swift proliferation of editions gives evidence of its popularity: The first edition was released by Methuen on 31 August 1911, in a run of 1500 copies; it was into its third edition by November of the same year, and a fourth was necessary in 1912. The American editions published by John Lane saw similar success (Sheridan xx). That first edition was a handsome and daunting work: a five-shilling 204-page octavo bound in green cloth board with golden lettering and trim. The layout was simple, but the size of the font used allowed for only three or four stanzas per page at most, necessitating a great deal of page-turning during a sustained reading. Subsequent editions maintained the same format, for the most part, until a dramatic shift in 1928 with the tenth edition, which saw the page size enlarged and a series of stylized woodcuts by Robert Austin added. The woodcuts depict various incidents from within the poem and without, and Austin is not afraid to depart from pleasant generalities. Some panels, such as the cleaving of the head of Harold or Alfred slaying Ogier, are quite marvelously savage.

The Ballad stagnated outside of these editions thereafter, appearing mostly in fragmentary inclusions in various anthologies in the years that intervened between the Austin edition and its reissue with Sister Bernadette Sheridan’s extensive annotations in 1993. Indeed, Alfred’s song of stubborn Christianity in Book III was the most frequently anthologized part of all, though later collators may have been taking a cue on this from the influential publisher Edward Marsh. Marsh, in his Georgian Poetry series of anthologies (1911-1922), hoped to vindicate his “belief that English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty” (Marsh v). To this end, he collected what he felt were pieces representative of the new turn in English poetry after the death of Victoria and the general waning of the established literary order. Marsh acknowledged in his preface that some of his choices might seem peculiar, whether for a given author’s relative obscurity or for a given piece’s differences in tone, scope or focus from the rest of them. His inclusion of a selection from

---

10 This edition would itself be reissued in 2001 by the Ignatius Press, which has made a project of reprinting all of Chesterton’s works in an expansive uniform edition. Their standalone version of the Ballad is a reproduction of Sheridan’s edition, however, rather than a specially commissioned one for the Collected Works series.

11 See, for example, the Oxford Book of Christian Verse (1940; 520-23), Modern Verse in English (1958; 177-84), or The Home Book of Verse (1965; 2823-27).
Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*: From Conception to Critical Reception

The *Ballad* was not originally his idea, in fact; A.E. Housman, having been approached by Marsh to submit some poetry of his own, noted instead (in a letter to Marsh of Oct. 1st, 1912) that Marsh “[does] not mention Chesterton: his ‘Ballad of the White Horse’ is absurd in its plan and its conception and often cheap and brassy in its ornament, but it contains quite a lot of really magnificent verses, which impressed me more than anything I have read for a long time” (126).

The result of this suggestion was the inclusion of what Marsh titled “The Song of Elf (a fragment from the Ballad of the White Horse),” the Danish earl’s articulation of his soul-crushing view of the world in III.140-75—a thing beautiful in its ruin. The eight stanzas included are as good as anything Chesterton ever wrote, but they were not received without controversy. John Buchan, for example, reviewing the anthology in the *Spectator* of 18 Jan 1913, writes that he “should have chosen another extract […] than the ‘Song of Elf’—probably the verses describing the strange visitors to Alfred’s court” (107). Edmund Gosse, writing in the *Morning Post* a week later, felt that Marsh’s intentions had become blurred in places and objected to Chesterton’s inclusion full-stop: “What caprice it can be which has introduced [Chesterton], who flourished under Queen Victoria, among the latest candidates for renown it is beyond me to conjecture” (3). This was not exactly fair, as criticisms go; while it is true that Chesterton’s early poetical works, *Greybeards at Play* and *The Wild Knight*, were first published in 1900, it was not until the 1903 release of his study of Robert Browning that he could really be said to have “flourished.” Nevertheless, Marsh took these criticisms to heart and excised Chesterton from future editions of the anthology.

**Critical Reception**

The critical response to the poem, at first, was tinged by disappointment. The earliest unsigned review, as it appeared in the London *Times* on the evening of the *Ballad’s* publication, protests Chesterton’s overwhelming presence in the poem, railing against an author who, “whether he writes in prose or verse, has always something to say, and [...] usually says the same thing in both.” It also condemns the work as a “violently primitive” one in which “the effort sometimes distracts our attention from what is expressed, and in this ballad [...] destroys most of the illusion of the story.” This is not to say that the *Times*’ review is entirely negative, though; having laid bare its most grievous fault, the reviewer goes on to list its many merits. “In the first place it is all interesting—a rare thing in long poems and even short ones,” the reviewer writes, and cites the lively and mythic history Chesterton employs as one reason for this. He cites a portion of Alfred’s prophecy of future barbarians
in VIII.252-56 with evident approval, declaring that “we know that he is telling us of our present sins” (c5).

That said, however, the reviewer picks up on a troubling point that others would also note: in appropriating the voice of Alfred for his own pronouncements, Chesterton ran the risk of being refuted by those who could demonstrate that Alfred would neither have said nor supported any such words as Chesterton puts in his mouth. Chesterton, it must be said, was no stranger to refutation, and welcomed it with the same careless good humor as any other man might have accepted a compliment. Often this would take the form of gentle self-deprecation, but frequently it would inspire no action whatever on Chesterton’s part. Fr. O’Connor writes of “some jolly undergraduates” who had been “thrilled with a few quotations from the Ballad” during a personal reading by the author, but who nevertheless were later moved to point out the unlikelihood of Alfred’s and Guthrum’s left wings facing each other during the battle. “But as Chesterton had done it, he could not be ‘fashed’ to put it straight in a second edition,” and thus the error simply stood (O’Connor 67). Such vulnerability to easy refutation was fastened upon by the *Times* reviewer as fatal, the trouble being that “with all his fire and acuteness and eloquence he cannot persuade us that he is telling of things that ever happened” (c5). As we have seen from Chesterton’s declarations in the Preface to the *Ballad*, this was scarcely his concern to begin with.

Maurice Baring’s review of 7 Sept. 1911, in the *Eye-Witness*, attempted to counter some of these criticisms. Baring was hardly impartial in doing so; the paper, a weekly journal dedicated to exposing and fighting political corruption, was at that time being edited by Hilaire Belloc, a poet and novelist in his own right and one of Chesterton’s closest friends. Maurice Baring, a diplomat and author as well as a journalist, was in turn a firm friend of both Chesterton and Belloc, with whom he shared “the deepest things of life, faith and philosophy” (Ward, *Return* 131). He declares the *Ballad* to be “the record of a noble vision flung on to the canvas with bold strong colours [...] what Matthew Arnold said poetry should always be: ‘A criticism of life’.” Baring praises a number of passages, but singles out Alfred’s memory of the picture he once saw of the Madonna and Child (I.146-70) as “reach[ing] the high-water mark of ballad poetry.” His only complaint echoes that of the *Times* reviewer: the philosophy and moral thrust of the *Ballad* are so strong that they might overwhelm the poetry. Nevertheless, for Baring the intensity of the convictions behind the poetry are moreover a sign of the *Ballad’s* greatness; it was “written by G.K. Chesterton, and written as no one else could have written it. The wise reader will read it, re-read it, remember it and be thankful” (Baring 272-74).
The next review—from *The Academy* of 9 Sept.—outdoes Baring in its effusive praise, saying nothing of the *Ballad* that is not positive. The reviewer places it and its production squarely against the moderns, wondering whether future generations “will notice to what extent some in our day are experimenting with the old poetic forms side by side with others who are rashly throwing away the old forms altogether,” and holding the *Ballad* up as a heroic step backwards in the face of perverse progress. The reviewer accepts the *Ballad*’s allegorical function without question, affirming that its historical trappings are a vehicle for its real subject, which is “actually and more truly [...] the defence of Christianity against the inroads of barbaric heresy.” The reviewer also agrees wholeheartedly with Chesterton’s thesis in the prefatory note concerning the uses and abuses of history, writing with evident pleasure that “Mr. Chesterton has very wisely elected to go behind the King Alfred of the carping historian to the King Alfred of tradition,” and is also careful to note the triumphant militarism of the piece, which contains some of Chesterton’s typical “appeals for the clearness and rightness of personal combat,” with the *Ballad* proving so successful on this score that certain portions of it are enough to “stir the blood and exalt the mind with the great gusto of living.” The *Academy* reviewer concludes this appraisal with the declaration that, whatever happens to Chesterton and the rest of his works, the *Ballad* “will not be permitted easily to die. [...] In this book he wins past to something more perdurable and permanent.” This reviewer is not the only person to make such a claim, whether at the time of the *Ballad*’s publication or later, and the shadow of neglect under which the poem would fall as the years went by can make such statements seem misguided or bittersweet, depending upon one’s perspective (Anon. Rev. 9 Sept. 275-76).

The critic in the *Saturday Review* of 16 Sept. 1911, writes only briefly on the *Ballad*, but the tenor of the offered comments suggests a certain lack of satisfaction:

In *The Ballad of the White Horse*, Mr. G.K. Chesterton incidentally raises half-a-dozen questions that men may quarrel over for years without coming to conclusions. The question of propaganda in art is one. How far does Mr. Chesterton’s brand of dogmatic Christianity make this *Ballad* and how far does it mar it? [...] Mr. Chesterton the propagandist and Mr. Chesterton the poet are like the Siamese twins, and an attempt to sever the two would be disastrous to both. Yet how often one longs for a surgical operation! (Anon. Rev. 16 Sept. 277)

The critic goes on to cite a portion of Alfred’s reply to the Danes while disguised as a minstrel in Book III as being “typical of the Ballad’s strength and weakness,” in that it is fine poetry in itself but suffers from being what the reviewer views...
as a propagandistic and unfair “damn[ing] of the heathen root and branch.” Chesterton has gotten in the way of his own creation. The reviewer picks up on the same point raised in the *Times*, criticizing Chesterton for having “too openly snatched the monarch’s harp from his hand to improvise a political manifesto.” Still, the reviewer is willing to admit that Chesterton “has done a fine thing” with the *Ballad*, not least of which is to be found in his having been able to “keep the reader alert and curious for a thousand stanzas.” The reviewer exaggerates the poem’s length, but the tribute paid to Chesterton is real enough, crediting Chesterton’s descriptive ability, which the reviewer feels is at its best when it is *only* describing things and not editorializing upon them. Particular attention is drawn to Chesterton’s description of the Danish war-king Guthrum and his thanes in the heroic words of III.52-68.

This trend of negativity continues with an unsigned piece in the *Westminster Review* on the 23 September. While the reviewer grudgingly admits that one “cannot reasonably object to a treatment of history pretty much in accord with the whole practice of ballad-making,” it is nevertheless the case that the thing is rather “essentially the Ballad of G.K.C.—barn, cakes, slaughter and all . . . .” Finding the subject uncongenial to modern tastes, the reviewer also has hard words for the *Ballad*’s style, which is declared “never [to have] attracted and enslaved an apter and easier pen.” Chesterton “lets the exaction of his rhymes trap him into nonsense and banality [...] [and] his energy is his worst foe. He is always at extremes” (Anon. Rev. 23 Sept. 279). This critic anticipates Michael D. Hurley’s later caution that Chesterton’s ballad stanzas “may easily be taken for noisy nonsense” (39); there is in Chesterton’s work a considerable excess, evincing (to return to the critic at the *Westminster Review*) “a facility without the least effort after restraint.” The reviewer finds the battle imagery monstrous and overdone—he goes so far as to compare it to “the Car of Juggernaut” at one point; a physician perhaps in need of his own trade—while the *Ballad*’s purported hero is left a tiny and ineffectual figure in the face of the better-characterized Danes. All of this is crowned with a rampant didacticism that makes it “a hard task” to “imagine Mr. Chesterton writing anything [...] that would allow its life and truth to be its own lesson.” Nevertheless, as with the reviewer from the *Saturday Review*, the *Westminster* critic concludes with the admission that the *Ballad* is legitimately thrilling, a “lush, jovial, heyday work.” To say this of “a poem nearly 200 pages long,” he writes astutely, “is to say a great deal” (Anon. Rev. 23 Sept. 278-80).

Lest it be thought that this negative reception grew unopposed with each passing week, it would behoove us to consider two more reviews—one from the *Yorkshire Post* of 27 Sept. 1911, and another, finally, from a volume of *The Dublin Review* published in the first quarter of 1912. The *Post* reviewer extols the *Ballad* as something of a glorious surprise coming from Chesterton, although
those familiar with the fragments he had published before in the *Albany Review* would not have been so startled. It is the critic’s view that the publication of the *Ballad* marked a turning point in Chesterton’s career, for “the stern repression of the most noticeable of his prose mannerisms reveals him to us fundamentally as a poet.” Indeed, the *Ballad* “is certainly the finest work that he has done yet,” though the reviewer echoes the common complaint that the greatness of Chesterton’s own soul, so thoroughly injected into his poem, rather overshadows that of Alfred and the other Saxons. But that is his only complaint, and it is cautiously expressed; the reviewer is otherwise wholly supportive of Chesterton’s style, subject matter and message, taking particular delight in the passages “when the roar and rush of battle gets into his blood and carries him impetuously, ragingly, furiously swift, and eager, through the confused welter of the fight at Ethandune.” It is a soul-stirring thing, the best in the form since Macaulay, and the reviewer is confident in his assertion that “much of it will doubtless survive its creator and take its place among the things that are treasured” (Anon. Rev. 27 Sept. 281-82).

The final review to be considered, as published in *The Dublin Review*, offers extensive praise similar to Maurice Baring’s, though it differs from his in what little it criticizes. The review is attributed to “M.W.”—quite possibly Maisie Ward, who was, like Baring, a member of Chesterton’s extended social circle and who contributed to the *Review* at that time—and in it we find the familiar praise of Chesterton’s decision to adopt a romantic rather than scientific view of history. “Such a use of legend,” M.W. writes, “should surely carry us back more truly to ‘the days of old’ than the very bare bones that are left” after the historians have had their way. M.W. makes freer use of the *Ballad* itself in this review than do any of the other critics, but this is because she is convinced that such extensive citation is only proper when “welcoming so great an event in the world of literature as the appearance of the *White Horse.*” Indeed, this event seems so significant to M.W. that the heavy presence of Chesterton himself within the *Ballad* could be viewed as a positive rather than negative aspect, and the only criticism she sees fit to offer, contra Baring and others, is that “prophecy of the future is nearly always inartistic” in “narratives that suppose the author to be living in a past age,” and whether or not Chesterton has overcome this problem is more than she can say (193-96).

In considering these reviews there are a number of trends that present themselves. The first, with some relatively limited exceptions, is a broad admiration for the *Ballad’s* style. It is viewed as being at once an evocative instance of the traditional form and a modern engagement with that form as only Chesterton could have done it. Coupled with this is a similarly broad appreciation for the *Ballad’s* romantic as opposed to historical nature, turning mostly on Chesterton’s preface. When once a strictly historical approach is
abandoned, however, it becomes considerably easier for the author to intrude upon his own work, both through the events and content he invents as well as his approach to material adopted from earlier sources. It is generally agreed upon, even by the Ballad’s most laudatory reviewers, that Chesterton’s presence in the Ballad is inescapable and possibly obstructive.

Most intriguingly, however—and poignantly for modern devotees of the Ballad—are the statements on the poem’s broad and enduring appeal. From review to review the epic is praised at the very least for being an exhilarating and popularly interesting thing, contra many of the modernist productions of the time, and in many cases the reviewers go further still in speculating that the Ballad would become a work of lasting value. At the time of the Ballad’s publication there may have been every reason to think so; Chesterton was more popular then than he had ever been, though his popularity would only grow in the years leading up to his death in 1936, and the release of another volume of poetry (including the better-known “Lepanto”) in 1915 further solidified Chesterton’s reputation as a poet of considerable talent and diverse production. We have seen now, however, that such an immortalization has not, in fact, occurred.

Whatever the merits of the critics’ predictions may have been, the Ballad was a broad success that only seemed to grow in popularity as the years went by and there was still some question about whether or not the Modernists and their project would succeed. The experience of Tory statesman and literary critic George Wyndham, as expressed to Chesterton in an enthusiastic letter, could be taken as a representative example of the Ballad’s reception, at least among a particular class. It is positive in a way and to a degree that a modern author would almost by necessity find suspicious, and it is too effusive not to be cited here in full:

I must thank you for the “White Horse.” I cannot go on reading it to myself (4 times) and reading it aloud at the top of my voice (5 times) and refrain any longer from thanking you. It is your due to be told that many eyes shine with delight at its strength, and that knots climb up the throats of men and women at its beauty. It is wisdom we shall patiently learn. “At last,” and “Thank God,” are what people say when they read it or hear it read. I thank you in addition to thanking God and my stars for having given what I most needed in largest measure. I am not selfish over it. I do not hoard it for my own satisfaction. On the contrary I read it aloud to all my friends and have a huge joy in watching it working in them. This I can easily do over the top of the book, as I know most of the plums by heart. Like all great gifts, it goes around, it can be shared. It is not like a diamond or a sonnet in a language which few people know. To read the “White Horse” aloud is like bathing in the sea or riding over the
downs in a company that becomes good company because of the exhilaration. (qtd. in Barker 204)

Now, Chesterton was at this point—and indeed, through the bulk of his life—so thoroughly enmeshed in the literary world that to distinguish between the reviewers and his social circle would in many cases be difficult. Nevertheless, the opinions of those who knew and loved him without necessarily writing about him in newspapers all of the time may be fruitfully sought, here, however briefly. In his brother Cecil’s book, already mentioned above, the *Ballad*-in-progress is cited as evidence that Chesterton’s poetic style is at last maturing, and finally moving towards a beauty that was somewhat lacking in his earlier work, *The Wild Knight* (*Criticism* 237). Hilaire Belloc, his dearest friend, had little to say about the *Ballad*, having vastly preferred “Lepanto.” Indeed, he sees the *Ballad* as “an extension of the same theme” found in the later war song (Belloc 71), though he grants that many parts of the *Ballad* are “good stuff [...] inward stuff [...] stuff you don’t get in Anthologies!” (97).

Frances Chesterton’s importance to the creative process has already been noted, but her involvement with the poem did not end there. Fr. John O’Connor writes that she “cherished it very carefully [...] [and] she was more in love with it than with anything else he had in hand” (O’Connor 31). Maisie Ward tells the tale of Frances’ frequent trips to the cottage of a young family friend, where she would “[read aloud] the *Ballad* ‘with such love and pride in her voice’” (*Return* 265). Fr. O’Connor himself would later say that Book III, “The Harp of Alfred,” “contains some of the best lyrical thinking in all the literature known to [him]” (O’Connor 65). He continues:

Wagner is a penny trumpet in this unique tournament of song, in which the sensual Pagan, the poetic Pagan, the savage Pagan, and the cultured Pagan say their say with music, before Alfred says the say of Christian Fact. I wish I could claim any suggestions of mine as occasioning such immortal lines, but the nearest I can remember is that I made merry at the expense of My Lord Macaulay’s phrase about burying one’s blighted love in the solitude of the cloister. (65)

There were some whom he met in America that remembered him and the *Ballad* fondly as well. Thomas Caldecott Chubb tells of their meeting in New Haven in 1922, and of the awkwardness that was broken by Chubb’s bashful proffering of a copy of the *Ballad* for Chesterton to sign. “In that varnished period,” he writes, “the ‘Ballad’ seemed to me a high point in English poetry” (Clemens 94). But Chubb had a complaint: “that anyone who could write this immortal stuff should waste his time turning out such poor trash as [...] novels [...] aggravating essays [...] and—horror of horrors—the Father Brown
Nicholas Milne

‘detective’ stories, was, in a ghastly way, incredible” (Clemens 94). John Gould Fletcher, the imagist poet, considered the Ballad “too long for most people, I fancy, but absolutely characteristic of his great, generous, simple, and manly nature” (Clemens 160). Clement Wood, the Glory Road (1936) author and biographer, felt that Chesterton’s poem was “the greatest of all modern ballads, possibly the greatest of all ballads,—more sustainedly memorable, glorious throughout” (Clemens 161). We have already seen what a young C.S. Lewis thought of the poem during his own wartime experience, but it is also worth recalling that the Ballad occupied a firm and unshakeable place in his heart, next only, perhaps, to Chesterton’s theo-historical tome, The Everlasting Man (1925). His defense of Chesterton’s work from the charges of James Stephens in 1946 saw Lewis uphold the Ballad as a “permanent and dateless” work (“Period” 150). “Does not the central theme of the Ballad—the highly paradoxical message which Alfred receives from the Virgin—embody the feeling, and the only possible feeling, with which in any age almost defeated men take up such arms as are left them and win?” (151). George Sayer also cites his first encounter with Lewis when Sayer was an undergraduate, and how Lewis’ attempt to test Sayer on whether or not he had memorized any worthwhile poetry was interrupted when Sayer’s recitation of a passage (II.220-23) from the Ballad was completed with great gusto by Lewis himself (Sayer xviii-xix). "Marvelous stuff, isn't it?" he exclaimed. “Don’t you like the way Chesterton takes hold of you in that poem, shakes you, and makes you want to cry? I think I like best of all the last part. What’s it called? ‘Ethandune.’ Here and there it achieves the heroic, the rarest quality in modern literature” (xix).

A final note is also a sour one. For reasons of thematic affinity and a shared religious and mythic outlook between the two authors, there have been efforts to uncover a connection between Chesterton’s Ballad and J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings. Various articles and books have examined the relationship between Chesterton and Tolkien, generally arguing for a mystical and thematic affinity between the two medieval-ish Catholic authors.12 As compelling as this general thesis is, at many points, there is reason to think that it may be somewhat problematic where the Ballad is concerned. Joseph Pearce admits that “it is clear that Tolkien knew, and largely sympathized with, Chesterton’s work,” but that “the danger of overstating the case was [nevertheless] apparent” in, for example, Christopher Clausen’s 1974 article (“Tolkien” 117). In Pearce’s view the similarities that Clausen cites are either too general—a king leading his people to victory over great evil is hardly a novel plot—or possibly misconstrued, as with Clausen’s identification of the three races of Middle-Earth with the three

---


38 © Mythlore 129, Fall/Winter 2016
chiefs supporting Alfred. What is more, Pearce notes, “[a]lthough Tolkien was well acquainted with Chesterton’s Ballad, admiring it greatly as a young man before becoming more critical of its undoubted flaws in later years, the extent of his scholarship suggests that his direct indebtedness to Chesterton must be limited” (117).

This “becoming more critical” of which Pearce writes could scarcely be exaggerated. Across all of the ebullient praise of the Ballad offered by other Christian authors rings the stern bell of Tolkien, who all but condemned the poem. In a letter to his son written in 1944:

P13 [...] has been wading through The Ballad of the White Horse for the last many nights; and my efforts to explain the obscurer parts to her convince me that it is not as good as I thought. The ending is absurd. The brilliant smash and glitter of the words and phrases (when they come off, and are not mere loud colours) cannot disguise the fact that G.K.C. knew nothing whatever about the ‘North’, heathen or Christian. (Tolkien 92)

In spite of these sentiments, however, Pearce nevertheless agrees with Clausen that there is at least an indirect Chestertonian influence on Tolkien and his work, and that, as such, “there are clearly discernible links of affinity between the two men” (“Tolkien” 117).

CONCLUSIONS

In considering these reviews and responses there are a number of trends that present themselves. The first is a cautious admiration for the Ballad’s style. It is viewed as being at once an evocative instance of the traditional form and a modern engagement with that form as only Chesterton could have done it. Coupled with this is a similarly broad appreciation for the Ballad’s romantic as opposed to historical nature, turning mostly on Chesterton’s prefatory note. When once a strictly historical approach is abandoned, however, it becomes considerably easier for the author to intrude upon his own work, both through the events and content he invents as well as his approach to material adopted from earlier sources. It is generally agreed upon, even by the Ballad’s most laudatory reviewers, that Chesterton’s presence in the Ballad is inescapable and possibly obstructive—a complication indeed for a work intended to let tradition do the talking instead.

More poignant are the statements on the poem’s broad and enduring appeal. From review to review the epic is praised at the very least for being an exhilarating and popularly interesting work, and in many cases the reviewers go further still in speculating that the Ballad would become a work of permanent

13 Priscilla Mary Anne Reuel (b. 1929), Tolkien’s daughter.
value. At the time of the Ballad’s publication there may have been every reason to think so; Chesterton was more popular then than he had ever been, though his popularity would only grow in the years leading up to his death in 1936, and the release of another volume of poetry (including the better-known “Lepanto”) in 1915 further solidified Chesterton’s reputation as a poet of considerable talent and diverse production. It is a legacy that endures among his admirers; where the broader popular memory is concerned, however, it has faded like the memories of Ethandune.

Works Cited
Chesterton, G.K. Alarms and Discursions. Methuen, 1910.
—. The Ballad of the White Horse. Methuen, 1911.
—. The Ballad of the White Horse. Edited by Bernadette Sheridan, IHM, Marygrove College Press, 1993.
—. “The Last Hero.” Poem Hunter, poemhunter.com/poem/the-last-hero-3/.
Gosse, Edmund. “Knocking at the Door.” The Morning Post, 27 Jan 1913, p. 3.
Rev. of The Ballad of the White Horse, by G.K. Chesterton. The Times, 31 Aug 1911, p. c5.
Rev. of “Georgian Poetry of the Twentieth Century.” Westminster Gazette, 4 Jan 1913, p. 3.


### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nick Milne** is a part-time professor in the Department of English at the University of Ottawa. His research focuses on the Edwardian cultural milieu, with a particular emphasis upon the home-front literatures of World War I. He is a regular contributor to the University of Oxford’s World War I Centenary blog, WW1C, and his work has appeared in *Mythlore, Canadian Literature, The Quint,* and *Studies in the Humanities.*
Mythopoeic Press

Books by and about writers of mythopoeic and fantastic literature

The Mythopoeic Society Press publishes material by and about writers of mythopoeic and fantastic literature. Our publication projects primarily involve works related to the Inklings, as well as those who influenced or who were influenced by their work. Works previously published or being considered for future projects include out-of-print materials, collections of short articles and essays, and other scholarly items.

RECENTLY RELEASED!

The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic: in World War I • $19.95
Edited by Janet Brennan Croft
Available in print and Kindle from Amazon.com; other ebook versions from Smashwords.com

This volume sprang from a desire to examine selected examples of the fantastic response to World War I among British authors. Its contents comprise a mix of five classic articles from Mythlore and twelve new essays. The first half of the book considers the Inklings, the Oxford literary group centered on J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, while the second half deals with other authors.

Recently Released!

Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J. R. R. Tolkien • $19.95
Edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan
Available in print and Kindle from Amazon.com; other ebook versions from Smashwords.com

To remedy such claims that Tolkien’s fiction has nothing useful or modern to say about women, Perilous and Fair focuses attention on views that interpret women in Tolkien’s works and life as enacting essential, rather than merely supportive roles. It includes seven classic articles as well as seven new examinations of women in Tolkien’s works and life.

Mythlore Index Plus • Free
Edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Edith Crowe, with Artwork by Tim Kirk and Sarah Beach
Available in PDF format only from www.mythsoc.org/press

Available as a fully searchable digital file, Mythlore Index Plus not only covers all issues of Mythlore, but includes all articles and reviews published in the Tolkien Journal (now out of print), several Mythcon Conference Proceedings, and the Mythopoeic Press Essay Collections.

Intersection of Fantasy & Native America: From H. P. Lovecraft to Leslie Marmon Silko
Available in print from Amazon.com
Edited by Amy H. Sturgis and David D. Oberhelman (2009) • $23.00

Past Watchful Dragons: Fantasy and Faith in the World of C. S. Lewis
Available in print from Amazon.com
Edited by Amy H. Sturgis and Preface by Darrell Gwaltney (2007) • $20.00

Tolkien on Film: Essays on Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings
Available in print from Amazon.com
Edited by Janet Brennan Croft (2005) • $19.95

The Pedant and the Shuffly by John Bellairs
Available in print from Amazon.com
Illustrated by Marilyn Fitschen and Foreword by Brad Strickland (2001) • $9.00

The Masques of Amen House by Charles Williams
Available in print from Amazon.com
Edited by David Bratman (2000) • $16.00

Chad Walsh Reviews C. S. Lewis
Available in print from Amazon.com
(1998) • $4.95

For more info, visit www.mythsoc.org/press