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Cavalier Treatment: Sword of Ethandune

Lee Speth

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Cavalier Treatment

a column.

The Sword of Ethandune

Lee Speth

A kingdom set free in a rush of vaulting images, one man standing against his fate and beating it down, destruction confused and routed by certainty standing up and proclaiming itself. All these and more have been put to rhyme in The Ballad of the White Horse, G.K. Chesterton's most ambitious literary undertaking.

This long poem, a medieval pastiche in eight "books", was one of the few works that GKC ever truly labored over, polishing, re-writing, blotting like the rest of us mortals. The essays, stories and light verse for which he is best known came from him in an apparently effortless stream, with no reconsiderations. The multi-faceted remaking of the world on which he was engaged allowed for no looking back; for all his bulk, good humor and paeans to the creature comforts, Chesterton, a man with an acute sense of evil, was in a torrential hurry to alter the course of the age.

But he waited upon the Ballad, gave it breathing space, wanted deeply to make a good job of it. Whether he succeeded is controversial. Many Chestertonians, the late Marshall McLuhan for instance, have regarded it with regret. (Tolkien gave up on it and felt that Chesterton had no grasp of northmen. See his Letters.) Taste is proverbially difficult to argue and rifts as to poetry, especially in these days, would appear to be non-negotiable. As one who is repeatedly intoxicated by the Ballad, I will merely offer here a few indications of what I find in it.

First, the thing is truly heroic; I mean that Chesterton's King Alfred, duly conscious of man's littleness and fear, always retains a balancing sense of man's possibility and splendor. Alfred grasps that he may be overcome; his England might go down before the Danes. Loss has been his school: "Returning as a wheel returns/ Came ruin and the rain that burns/ And all began once more." But always there is the knowledge, a knowledge more concrete than any mere calculation, that he might, after all, be permitted to win.

Second, the verse is sounding and mouth-filling. It is a poem above all others to be recited aloud, preferably from memory (I have stored up half of it and find it a remarkably good companion): "Thick thunder of the snorting swine,/ Enormous in the gloam...." It is quotable: "The great Gaels of Ireland/ Are the men that God made mad,/ For all their wars are merry/ And all their songs are sad."

Third, it is constantly, formidably true: "If we would have the horse of old,/ Scour ye the horse anew."

And fourth, the imagery is frequently bril-

liant, almost always arresting: "Wine like blood from Burgundy,/ Cloaks like the clouds from Tyre,/ Marble like solid moonlight,/ And gold like frozen fire."

The poem was published about a decade before GKC entered the Roman church, yet throughout one notes the desire to reunite the ideas of England and Catholicism. It is probable that Chesterton aimed at erecting (or restoring) a myth of Alfred and the Battle of Ethandune to counter the enduring myth of Elizabeth I and the Armada - a myth, to Chesterton, productive of arrogance and sterile Sunderings. Alfred is more alone than Elizabeth ever was as queen, and his ragtag army bears no comparison to the fleet of Lord Howard and John Hawkins. GKC's Danes are more savage than any Renaissance Spaniard. And Alfred the Great is Chesterton's ideal king because both English and Catholic: "I come of the Wessex clay/ And carry the cross of Rome." Throughout the poem the congruity of the two identities is insisted upon; in fact, it is shared faith that welds the lingering Roman, the alienated Celt and the baffled Saxon into one national force against the invaders.

It is a distinctly religious poem, but the supernatural is not strongly emphasized, save for the initial (extra-historical) vision of Mary, with her single message to the king that she will make him no promise. She briefly reappears over the battlefield in Book 7, but the main thrust of the poem's religion is psychological; again and again Chesterton returns to the implications of belief on action. Yet it is no bigot's manifesto; some of the most lyric utterance is given to the despairing pagan: "For this is a heavy matter/ And the truth is cold to tell./ Do we not know - have we not heard,/ The soul is like a lost bird,/ The body a broken shell?/ And a man hopes, being ignorant,/ Till in white woods apart/ He finds, at last, the lost bird, dead,/ And a man may yet hold up his head/ But never more his heart."

The poem has its defects, even in my partisan eyes. Lines are padded to rescue the meter, there is overuse of certain words (notably "great"), some of the images are too obscure and allusive. Tolkien is right: the vikings in The White Horse do not seem much like the northmen I know from the sagas. There are a few anachronisms and inconsistencies of description. And Alfred's monologue in the last book is too long and its aim, precisely at the author's own time, is too obvious.

All of which allowed, I insist that The Ballad of the White Horse is a remarkable work, transcending its defects with vigor, color, characterization, narrative excitement and

sheer intellectual substance. It is the great poem of Hope in the English language.

It was published separately, but can be found in Chesterton's Collected Poems (there are variations in different texts and I'm not sure which edition should be regarded as definitive). It does not deserve its present obscurity; I feel as secure as a mortal can that it will never vanish completely.

CONTRIBUTORS

We are pleased to further introduce the writers of articles and cover artists.

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She is the Chairman of the English Department at Mills College, and a scholar on Milton and Richard III. Ph.D. at John Hopkins University. She is a long devotee of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, and has taught a course on basic myths at Mills for many years. She wrote The Sherwood Ring in 1957, and was nominated for the Newberry Award for The Perilous Gard in 1974.

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B.A. in French at Barnard College. She has lived in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, and claims she is currently neither a scholar or a teacher, at least not professionally. Heraldry is her favorite hobby, and she enjoys fantasy and science fiction generally and Tolkien in particular. She also enjoys music and drawing.

Patrick Wynne

He lives in Fosston, Minnesota and works as a Dental Lab Technician, besides the great deal of drawing which he does. Besides his strong interest in Tolkien, he enjoys writing poetry, and reading historical novels such as by

Robert Graves. The illustration on the cover is from The Silmarillion: "...he looked down on Beleg's face. Then Turin stood stonestill and silent, staring on that dreadful death, knowing what he had done; as so terrible was his face, lit by the lightning that flickered all about them, that Gwindor cowered down upon the ground and dared not raise his eyes."

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The Holy Birth

of a victim of child abuse

a gift for M

The ground was granite under spiraling snow;
Packed and blackened ice thickened the roads;
The sun sank down in scaly Capricorn
That crawls over cragged mountain rocks.
The sign of the summer moon in silence rose
Her back turned upon my scarlet birth
And under Saturn bound by iron bands,
Racked by the reaches of a planet cross,
I struggled gasping into an exile world
Far from my home among the summer stars.

I heard no echoing hymn from the third heaven;
My wail came wavering, broken to my ears
And on my cheeks my tears were threads of ice.
But Capricorn my mother has no tears,
No eyes, naught but shapeless stones of the waste;
The tree that bore my body in flaying boughs
Relaxed not its rigor for tender flesh.
Yet from her vinegared milk I drew the strength
Of everlasting hills to climb a hill;
The bands of Saturn kept my shattering heart
Firm against the day of strap and scourge,
The day of driving nails and searing thirst,
The day of splitting earth and God-no-more.

The breathless blackness of a rocky womb
Dusked to dawn, rose, white, and gold:
And rainbowed rays shafted through the gaping
jagged gray-stone, the grave of death.
My Lady of the summer moon and stars
Arose upon my birth and turned to me
Her face aglow as with a thousand suns
And all my wounds were wells of healing light.
We walk, dropping light, warming the earth:
The way is strewn with elven gems, and edged
With blooms of every hue, and thornless rose;
The tree bends down its dark-stained bough, and buds;
Its snowflake-flowers fan on fragrant winds
And song streams through the sky.

Fixed is the full;
Close-cradled every heart in one embrace,
Joined worlds of worlds in endless rings of love.
Filled all the cosmic wintry deens with warm
Blessed by the eves of Capricorn, the summer stars.