

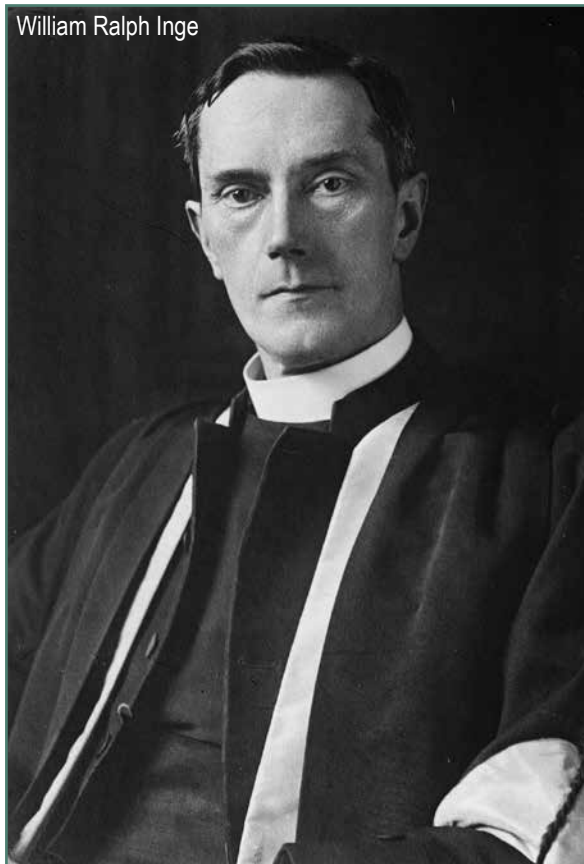


Portrait of a Dean: Crossing Swords with Chesterton

During the first half of the twentieth century, William Ralph Inge was a popular theologian, literary journalist, and clerical celebrity who reached an audience which most modern ecclesiastical leaders would count with envy. He was a serious contender for the Nobel Prize for Literature in his later life. His literary associates and enemies included George Bernard Shaw, Christopher Dawson, the Baron von Hügel, G. K. Chesterton, and Hilaire Belloc. A child of the mid-nineteenth century, he sought, and in his season, enjoyed the position of a late Victorian sage whose opinion on nearly every aspect of current affairs was frequently sought, affirmed, debated, disparaged—everything but ignored. His writings include a respected study of Christian mysticism, two volumes on Plotinus, the third-century Neoplatonist, and innumerable volumes of controversial essays, sermons, and articles on present concerns. His *oeuvre* shows qualities of serious-mindedness, deep erudition, wit, a dislike for modern society, and a rarity among men of the cloth—a knack for the effortless epigram; the line, often misattributed to Bishop Fulton Sheen, “Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next”, in fact originated with Inge, who was a living font of similar aphorisms. Several of his works written between the two world wars were best-sellers, and the standard biography of the man, written by Canon Adam Fox, a fellow Anglican man of letters, won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1960. He mattered, while living. Since his death, most everything he wrote has gone out of print.

Inge was, above all else, a man with a message, or more exactly, a man with several messages. He was among the best-known representatives of modernist

theology during the time when modernism was casting deep roots in the Anglican and other churches. He wrote a regular newspaper column for the *Evening Standard* for fully twenty-five years. He was much in demand as a lecturer on subjects both sa-



William Ralph Inge

cred and secular. On all, or nearly all, of the urgent questions of the day in Church and State, Inge, or as he was nicknamed, “The Gloomy Dean”, spoke with assuredness and authority from the end of the Victorian period till the age of the atomic bomb. As a thinker, he is rather more difficult to classify than some of his peers; Wells was the prophet of scientific technocracy; Chesterton was the semi-official spokesman of English Catholicism. For Inge, a

corresponding label is difficult to devise: He was a man of deep religious belief, an authority on and admirer of Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton, and other such medieval spiritual writers. Popular democracy he despised, and his occasional remarks on modern education reveal him to have been on the side of the older classical, humanistic pedagogy as opposed to the utilitarian mass instruction that was then winning the field in Britain and America. At the same time, he was very much an anti-dogmatist, despite holding clerical orders and serving at Cambridge as a professor of divinity. While he understood the value of the institutions of government and higher learning, his support for the institutions of faith was considerably less enthusiastic. His was decidedly not a “high” Anglicanism like that of T. S. Eliot or C. S. Lewis, and, in spite of his own warning against marrying the *zeitgeist*, Inge was not above an occasional dalliance with that most capricious of spirits. To the cause of applied Eugenics and population control he was fully committed, and referred to Francis Galton, the father of the movement, as “one of the best and wisest men whom I have known personally”. Writing in the aftermath of World War One, he expressed regret that, among war’s other evils, it tends to devour the lives of the “fit-

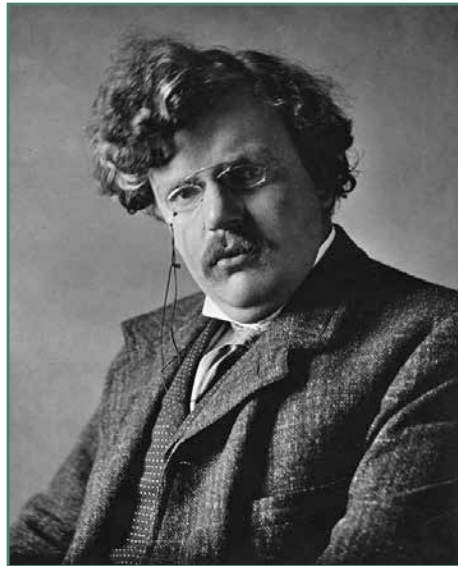
test” members of the species—though by what means he happened to confirm this fact he left unsaid. In one of his *Evening Standard* pieces, Inge states that “I do not think that the Americans have ever fully recovered from the Civil War. . . . The numerical loss was made good by immigrants of a type somewhat inferior to the splendid descendants of the English and Dutch colonists.” Here the “somewhat inferior” class to whom he alludes is most likely the

Irish, against whom he harbored strong and scarcely disguised prejudices. Remarkably, Inge subscribed to the Malthusian theory of population growth as late as 1931, quite a long time after Malthus' principal doctrines had been thoroughly exploded. As a writer, Inge is never a warm companion, and his voice is never more astringent than when lamenting the uncurbed growth of the more philoprogenitive sections of society—the worst sections, in his oft-repeated opinion: “There is nothing snobbish in admitting the obvious fact that the children of those who have made good are likely, on the average, to be more useful citizens than the children of wastrels and misfits. This dysgenic birth-rate, encouraged of course by taxation, gives serious concern . . .”, etc. In the same article he suggests that, in order to prevent excessive overcrowding in Britain, the national government ought to encourage emigration to the far corners of the empire with all its energies; men and women for whom there is no room at home ought to seek out new livelihoods in Australia, like so many inconvenient characters at the end of a Dickens novel. Recurrent in the great mass of his writings after World War One is the idea, stated with varying degrees of directness, that the peoples of Northern European ancestry are leagued in a Darwinian struggle against the danger of Latin, Slav, and Asian, who threaten like a rising sea to swamp the Anglo-Saxon and his nobler achievements. One like-minded contemporary he cited with approval in a lecture to the British Science Guild was none other than Lathrop Stoddard, the American historian and race-theorist who popularized the term *Untermensch* (“Subhuman”) as a categorical description of Jews and other “Asiatic” peoples. Readers of *The Great Gatsby* may recall a dinner scene early in the novel where Daisy Buchanan remarks that her boorish husband Tom has been enthusiastically reading Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color*; though unlike Inge, Tom had at least the excuse of being an incorrigible clod.

Yet one would be wrong to dismiss Inge as a monomaniacal crackpot in Holy Orders. The number of his intellectual interests, to judge by reading through the many odd volumes of his occasional prose, is itself an impressive testimonial to what a variety of knowledge the English educational system of the latter nineteenth century infused into its students. In a short five pages of *More Lay Thoughts of a Dean*, there appear quotations from Milton, Tennyson,

John Galsworthy, Mark Twain, the Spanish historian Salvador de Madariaga, and a tag of Homeric Greek, which he condescends to translate for us. It may as well be mentioned that this piece originally appeared as an article in a popular newspaper.

Neither is Inge the writer tedious or pedantic. He is often contrarian, occasionally whimsical, and, when not writing about race-suicide, the working classes' duty to practice birth control, or the devious and far-reaching conspiracies of the Catholic Church, he is full of pith and John Bullish good sense. Also—and this is certainly laudable in a man of the cloth—his books and articles are free of unction. He is admirably direct, genteel without being over-



refined, neither a bombastic pulpit-warrior nor a creeping Jesus. The reader never senses while reading Inge that he is being coaxed and maneuvered toward the baptismal font. To anyone who hates a priest who smiles too much, the manner of Inge's sacred writings comes as Balm of Gilead. Even if Inge was not the type one could accuse of being handicapped by too much intellectual humility, he has an agreeable sense of humor about his own profession and its human limitations. In his *Assessments and Anticipations*, there is a prudent examination of the art of preaching and its position in the modern church. Among other observations, he notes that one challenge a modern pastor faces in guiding his flock is the simple fact that many of the sheep are likely to be better educated than their shepherd. This remains quite as true a claim now as when he made it ninety years ago. I have known a fair number of ministers and priests in my time, respected most of them, and disliked certain others. Of two or three

I have thought that the level of intellect evident in their homilies was not quite worthy of their chosen occupation, and would be better suited to a scoutmaster instructing a troop of tenderfeet how to set up a dome tent.

Inge writes with fine economy and balance, and even in those many instances where his writing leaves a sour taste in the mouth, he never frames his arguments haltingly or stumbles over his thoughts in the expression of them. His contemporary Hilaire Belloc thought him the finest prose stylist then living, which says much, in light of how intensely the two men hated one another (Belloc also wrote the exuberantly spiteful *Lines to a Don* with Inge in mind). Against Chesterton, Belloc's *fidus Achates*, Inge prosecuted an intermittent war of the pen that ended only with Chesterton's death in 1936; Inge stands almost alone in the list of Chesterton's intellectual opponents in showing no sign of having ever been even slightly charmed or impressed by the man's gargantuan (and occasionally suffocating) good humor; the Catholic writer Christopher Hollis recalled after Chesterton's death that Inge once referred to him as “That obese mountebank, who crucifies Truth head downwards”. Somewhat unnecessarily, Hollis writes in the same paragraph that “Their differences of opinion were deep”.

While admitting that he permitted himself to pursue several enmities further than reason or decency would allow, we would be unjust to caricature the Dean of St. Paul's as nothing more than a funeral misanthrope. He was capable of cordial friendship as well as corrosive hatred, even with select persons whose political or religious principles were at odds with his own. Alfred Noyes, another Catholic man of letters, records in his autobiography that Inge and he shared a mutual respect for each other as *litterateurs* and as Christians, and that the Dean in later life confessed his gratitude for the Catholic Church as the principal guardian of the *Philosophia Perennis*, the body of the best classical and patristic thought synthesized by the Medieval Schoolmen. The positivist currents in philosophy that became fashionable at Oxford and Cambridge in Inge's later years he abominated, and the increasingly destructive martial technologies employed by all sides in the two world wars were a horror to him (one of Inge's sons was killed in World War Two). There appears in his later writings, both public and private, the growing

tone of regret from a man who feels he has lived too long. In a letter to Noyes written in 1951 Inge states “I shall be 91 on June 6th and rather hope it will be my last birthday. For *tempora pessima sunt*. . .” Inge would in fact survive another three years, ultimately outliving his wife and two of his children.

Greatly as Inge influenced the religious and intellectual climate of the English-speaking world while living, since his death the culture he represented and the objectives he pursued have either died out or been so greatly altered by time and circumstances that Inge would appear to have few teachings of permanent value to offer posterity. The birth control movement, triumphant as it has proven since its signal victories in the 1960s and 70s, no longer appeals to the same premises as those Inge recognized to justify its existence. Eugenics in the post-Nuremberg era has had a bad name, and its present promoters must represent their cause in gentler language

and with a moral vocabulary different from that which Inge, Stoddard and their kind employed in defense of racial “purity”. As for Inge’s theology, the liberal modernism he championed has not only captured his own church but even brought forth wild and exotic growths that likely would have profoundly disturbed him had he lived to see their flowering. It is hard to imagine him thinking much of even so old a book as Bishop John Robinson’s *Honest to God*, with its frankly silly thesis that the Christian Revelation needs to be thoroughly overhauled according to the standard of “What people today find credible.” Inge had his blind spots in religion as elsewhere, but his distrust of the masses at least saved him from offering up the whole of Christian supernaturalism on the altar of that most doubtful divinity, the Modern Mind.

Certainly he was something of a tragic figure. In his mind there existed simultaneously several discordant principles and contradictory allegiances that he never

managed to bring into any kind of harmonious order. He was an inheritor of the long and venerable tradition of Anglican humanism, and the possessor of an elegant and powerful mind lamentably enlisted in the service of several of the ugliest popular ideas of the past century. Reading Inge today, I find myself at once humbled in the presence of a superior mind, and rather discouraged to behold that same mind overthrown by a combination of pernicious ideological infatuations. Chesterton captured the man’s contradictions almost perfectly when he wrote: “There is no interval between the things he understands excellently and the things he refuses to understand at all.” This judgment of Chesterton’s appeared in 1930. More than a lifetime later, there is little need to modify it.

Thomas Banks resides with his wife and fellow teacher Angelina Stanford in North Carolina.

New Voices

New Poetry in English

Philip C. Kolin



Quietude

1 Kings 19:11–13

The outwardness of life
taunts us to be beholden
to the world with all its
unhallowed, shallow places

posted on the maps of misery.
Sending us on so many trips
that lead back to weariness.
But the world cannot wither you

if you go inward hiding from
the fiefdom of clocks and calendars
and manacled voices that mean
to enslave. Quietude is un-
encumbered freeing the self
from the self. Listen to the silence then
and hear God whispering your name,
calling you away from the world’s noise.