

An Interview with Father Ian Boyd

By Dale Ahlquist

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DA Please tell us how you discovered G.K. Chesterton and what works especially influenced you in the beginning?

IB My father knew Chesterton's work well. In fact, he must have been one of the few people in Canada who subscribed to *G.K.'s Weekly* in the 1920s and 1930s. I cannot remember a time in my life when I was unaware of Chesterton and of a Chestertonian view of life. Moreover, the Western Canadian world in which I grew up came close to being a Distributist society. It was a property-owning democracy. Almost all the people I knew as a child were free citizens, people who were in charge of their own businesses or owners of their own farms. There was also a family tradition which may explain my interest in the written word. My father was a lawyer who read widely. He came from a Scottish Catholic settlement in Eastern Nova Scotia. His father—my grandfather—Angus Boyd, was the editor of a weekly newspaper which his brother founded in 1852 and which is still being published today. You might therefore say that printer's ink is in my blood.

DA What do you consider the “quintessential” Chesterton book?

IB Since Chesterton believed that popular ideas are almost always right, and since the Father Brown stories are his most popular books, I consider these detective stories to be the most typically Chestertonian of all his writings. They are examples of what might be called stealth evangelization, combining as they do Chesterton's love for telling truth through parables, and his belief in the hidden presence of God in the part of life which is usually thought to be profane.

DA You did your doctoral dissertation on Chesterton's novels. It became a book, *The Novels of G.K. Chesterton*, which is a pretty standard reference work for any student of Chesterton's writings. This is an unfair question, but I'll ask it anyway! Do you have any different conclusions now about Chesterton's fiction than you did when you wrote your dissertation?

IB Yes, I do have a somewhat different view of that book today. Because of its emphasis on the social and political aspects of Chesterton's novels, it fails to do justice to the underlying religious meaning of his fiction. That is a book that I would like to write.

DA Even more than your book, the standard reference on Chesterton is, for many people, the *Chesterton Review*, which you have now edited for a remarkable thirty years. Tell us about its beginnings.

IB The idea for the journal originated at a conference in England at Spode House in the Spring of 1974 for the centenary of Chesterton's birth. I was spending a year in Oxford, trying to turn my doctoral dissertation into a readable book, and I suggested to some of the people attending the conference that there was need for an international journal devoted to Chesterton and the tradition to which he belonged.

DA In 30 years, you have edited and published almost ninety book-length volumes of the *Chesterton Review*. Do you have a favorite issue?

IB I am fond of our theme issues. The one devoted to Father Vincent McNabb seems to me to be particularly worthwhile. So are the C.S. Lewis and Maurice Baring issues, and many others.

DA And what do you consider some of the real high points of Chesterton scholarship that have appeared in the *Review*?

IB Many of the articles in the *Chesterton Review* were first read as papers at conferences organized by the Chesterton Institute which publishes the *Review*. These conferences were remarkable events. The one at St. Patrick's College in Maynooth a few years ago resulted in a good theme issue on the cultural crisis facing modern Ireland. But I remember best the conversations which occurred at that conference and at many others—such as the lively discussions that took place at our recent Oxford conference or at those in Croatia and Lithuania. People attending these conferences had things to say which were as valuable as some of the things said in the best of the conference papers. The quality of the writing found in the *Review* speaks for itself, and I have always believed that Coleridge was right when he said that good writing creates the taste whereby it is enjoyed.

DA You must be encouraged to see the growth of interest in Chesterton, but what are your greatest disappointments in regard to the Chesterton revival?

IB Yes, the growth of interest in America is especially impressive. Your work, Dale, has played a key role in bringing that about. It is disappointing to find so little interest in Chesterton in Britain, even though he is widely regarded as one of their great national writers.

DA Why do you think Chesterton is not studied more and taken more seriously in our colleges and universities?

IB That is a puzzling phenomenon. Perhaps it can be explained by the secularization that characterizes a modern consumerist culture. Chesterton believed that the coming cultural peril was “standardization by a low standard.” That coarsening of the culture affects institutions such as colleges and universities.

DA As editor of the *Review*, you have been an ambassador for Chesterton around the world. Tell us some of the interesting places you have been and the people you have met.

IB One of my most interesting visits was a visit to Japan. After completing a lecture tour, I visited Nagasaki and the district around that city, places where the hidden Christians lived their underground existence for more than two hundred years. It was a moving experience to stand in the little church where a delegation of these secret people made themselves known to a French missionary priest in the mid-nineteenth century.

DA And of course, you met Pope John Paul II. Who arranged that meeting?

IB I was in Italy that year giving lectures at Italian universities as the invitation of the Communion and Liberation movement. The Canadian Ambassador to the Holy See had also invited me to give a lecture at the Canadian Embassy to the Republic of Italy. I was a guest at the home of Ambassador Legault, and he arranged for me to meet the Holy Father. Later that same week, a Basilian priest who worked at the Secretary of State's office arranged for me to say Mass with Pope John Paul in his private chapel.

DA Could you tell if the Pope was very familiar with Chesterton? Do you know of any other Vatican connections with Chesterton?

IB Though he did not speak about Chesterton, I presented him with a copy of our Croatian special issue, a conference issue dealing with ethics and economics in post-Communist Europe. He spoke to me mainly about my Basilian religious community. He remembered Cardinal Flahiff, our former Superior General whom he had first met at the Vatican Council. He also spoke about Cardinal Carter, the honorary Chairman of the Chesterton Institute, who was the former Archbishop of Toronto. At that time, Cardinal Carter's health was failing, and the Holy Father asked me to bring him his best wishes and a rosary that he had blessed. I was able to do that on my return to Canada, much to the delight of Cardinal Carter, who wrote to the Pope, thanking him for his kindness.

DA What do you think were John Paul's most "Chestertonian" qualities?

IB His serenity and good humor were certainly Chestertonian. He made me think of the truth of Chesterton's comment that joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian.

DA What's next for the *Chesterton Review*?

IB Seton Hall University has proved to be a good home for the *Chesterton Review* and the Chesterton Institute. Within the next few years Professor Dermot Quinn will be taking over as Editor of the *Review*. There are also some interesting conferences being planned, including one at Seton Hall on the American writer Joseph Mitchell—someone who shared Chesterton's love for ordinary people, as well as a conference in Poland and one in Argentina this September.