
The First World War and perceptions of Catholicism in England

La Primera Guerra Mundial y las percepciones acerca del catolicismo en Inglaterra

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Abstract: After the First World War there was a changed, more positive, attitude in England towards Catholicism in England. It was perceived to have risen to the test of the War where other forms of religion had failed. The newly acquired optimism of Catholics found expression in the apologetics of the era. New doubts about Protestantism – tainted by imaginary association with Germany – gave Catholic apologists the opportunity to mount a largely successful polemic against the hitherto accepted biased national anti-Catholic historiography. An acknowledged classic of the genre is Hilaire Belloc's *Europe and the Faith*.

Keywords: Apologetics, Belloc, Catholic Evidence Guild, Catholic Literary Revival, First World War.

Resumen: Después de la Primera Guerra Mundial hubo en Inglaterra una actitud más positiva hacia el catolicismo inglés. Daba la impresión de que el catolicismo había estado a la altura de la prueba de la guerra, donde otras formas de religión habían fallado. El optimismo renovado de los católicos se manifestó en la apologética de la época. Al mismo tiempo –por asociación imaginaria con Alemania– surgieron nuevas dudas sobre el protestantismo que dieron a los apologetas católicos la oportunidad de poner en marcha una polémica bastante exitosa contra la historiografía anticatólica nacional, que se aceptaba hasta ese momento. Un clásico reconocido de este género es *Europa y la Fe* de Hilaire Belloc.

Palabras clave: apologética, Belloc, Catholic Evidence Guild, renacimiento literario católico, Primera Guerra Mundial.

It has often been said that the First World War was ‘good’ for Catholicism in Britain¹. The claim was already being made shortly after the 1918 Armistice; contemporary accounts describe the renewed confidence that Catholics felt at that time, and their renewed zeal for the conversion of England to the Faith². That Catholicism

¹ M. SNAPE, ‘British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War’, *Recusant History* 26 (October 2002) pp. 314-358, at p. 314.

² In this article I have used the term ‘Britain’ unless ‘England’ is specifically meant, as it is in this place. Although in common parlance the term ‘England’ is sometimes (mistakenly) used to refer to the whole of (Great) Britain, it is only one – albeit the largest – of three major parts of the same. Until Irish independence in the early 1920s the political entity represented in the Westminster Parliament was the ‘United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland’, and thereafter the ‘United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’. In this article the UK has not been referred to, except where the term ‘Britain’ would be clearly incorrect, as when Ireland is specifically referred to.

made good use of the opportunities presented during wartime has been corroborated in recent years by academic works focusing on the experiences of Catholic soldiers and the often stirring example given by their army chaplains, as well as on Catholic attitudes back at home to the conflict³.

Less attention has been paid to the ways in which this energizing effect of the War was captured and assimilated into post-war English Catholic identity and efforts at conversion. Even though the effect is mentioned in the contemporary literature, and can be detected in some of the apologetical writings of the period, the subject appears to have been relatively neglected by modern scholarship.

Perhaps the most immediate result of the War in the sphere of Catholic apologetics was the foundation, first in London and then in other major cities, of the Catholic Evidence Guild, whose teams of speakers, trained to expound the claims of the Church, organized lectures in the open air most evenings, and all day Sunday, from dozens of street corner platforms to audiences of hundreds of listeners. The Jesuit classicist and educator, Henry Browne, wrote a monograph about the Guild in 1921⁴. In it, he stated that at the time of the Guild's foundation in April 1918, as the Great War was perceptibly drawing to its close, there was great optimism among Catholics in England. Furthermore, according to him, there was a new attitude towards Catholics in 'the nation as a whole'⁵. Catholicism had stood the test of the Great War. On the other hand, 'other forms of religion and irreligion' had failed⁶. In particular, in the battle-zone, the 'unique power' of the Faith had been displayed 'in camps, in trenches and in hospitals'. Marshal Foch, a well-known Catholic, was widely admired. At home, too, the work done by Catholics was acknowledged as outstanding. 'Catholicity was in the air'⁷. The English people had even adopted some 'Catholic' practices, such as (at least ambiguously) prayers for the dead, war-shrines and the use of crucifixes⁸. Among Catholics there could be detected 'a deep patriotic stirring' to convert the whole nation⁹. It

³ See for instance the article cited above. Cfr. also R. SCHWEITZER, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt Among British and American Great War Soldiers*, Westport (Connecticut), 2003.

⁴ Henry Browne (1853-1941) was Professor of Greek at University College Dublin 1908-1922, and founder of the Classical Museum in Dublin. For more on his life, cfr. C. SOUYOUDZOGLOU-HAYWOOD, 'Browne, Henry Martyn', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, online [http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a1031#] [accessed 21 February 2014].

⁵ H. BROWNE, *The Catholic Evidence Movement: Its Achievements and its Hopes*, London, 1921, p. 45.

⁶ *Ibid.* In the context, the phrase 'other forms of religion and irreligion' probably refers in the first place to the scene in England, but, as we shall see, in the climate of the day German Lutheranism may also have been in the author's sights.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47. Browne was quoting examples cited by the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Francis Alphonsus Bourne, in his Pastoral Letter for Quinquagesima Sunday, 10 February 1918. The publication is F.A. BOURNE, *The Nation's Crisis*, London, 1918.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

was indeed this very atmosphere which had brought about the foundation of the Catholic Evidence Guild.

Browne cites two changes in the atmosphere. About the increased optimism among English Catholics in the post-war period there can be little doubt. Frank Sheed, in his memoirs, written many years later in 1975,¹⁰ insists that there was in the 1920s an atmosphere of tremendous optimism – even of euphoria¹¹ – among Catholics; this optimism was the context for the foundation of his publishing house, Sheed & Ward, in 1926.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is hard to accept *tout court* the often-cited renewed interest in religion among the population at large. Questions have been raised about its depth, as we shall see. But there is evidence to support Browne's claim that there was a renewed interest among non-Catholics in Catholicism: annual conversions to Catholicism definitely increased at that time. The statistics for the period as reported in the *National Catholic Directory* corroborate the change in the post-War period. The *Directory* covers England and Wales. Statistics for conversions to Catholicism were first published in the 1913 edition; the figures cited were the most recent up to that time, i.e., for 1911. The figures were published – with two brief gaps – from then until 1989 (See graph, p. 17). An initial rise from under 4,000 reported conversions in 1911 to 9,000 per annum during the First World War is probably in part only a reflection of the time taken to implement in full the reporting system across all dioceses. However, the increase from 9,000 or so conversions annually in the period from 1914 to 1917, to over 12,000 conversions in 1920 – an annual rate which was broadly maintained from then until 1934 – may well be attributable, at least in part, to the religious atmosphere in the years following the Great War. Of course, it may also be attributable to the work of the Catholic Evidence Guild. But since the Guild was, as Browne wrote, itself at least partly an expression of the post-war atmosphere, that would also be evidence of the same effect, albeit at one remove.

Maisie Ward, who lived through the War, and was both a Catholic writer and an Evidence Guild lecturer, addressed the subject nearly five decades later in her

¹⁰ Frank Sheed (1897–1981), writer and publisher, six times Master of the Catholic Evidence Guild, and its founder in Australia and the USA, was born in Sydney, Australia, and attended the Sydney University Law School, graduating with distinction. He moved to England in 1920. In 1926 he married the writer Maisie Ward, and founded the publishing house of Sheed and Ward. In 1933 he founded Sheed and Ward Inc. of New York. His books include *A Map of Life* (1933), *Theology and Sanity* (1947), *Theology for Beginners* (1957) and *To Know Christ Jesus* (1962). Together with Maisie Ward he compiled the *Catholic Evidence Training Outlines* (1934). Cf. P. HASTINGS, 'Sheed, Francis Joseph [Frank] (1897–1981), publisher and author', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online [http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101066037/Francis-Sheed] [accessed 21 February 2014].

¹¹ F.J. SHEED, *The Church and I*, London, 1975, p. 107.

1964 autobiography¹². She first asked the more general question, ‘Did the First World War really bring with it a religious revival’, before moving on to the particular question, ‘What was the condition of the Catholic body itself?’¹³. She answered the more general question in the following manner:

There is no denying the materialism of the world into which the war broke, nor that there was a reaction as a result of suffering and death towards a greater emphasis on the spiritual. But I wonder how deep this went. People were seeking for solace on any plane. Angels were alleged to have been seen at Mons; Russian soldiers were alleged to have passed through England. Both stories were half-believed; both brought a vague comfort.

The witness of the [non-Catholic] chaplains who had served in the Army and in the hospitals was for the most part negative – there was certainly no anti-clericalism; the chaplains had distributed cigarettes and written letters home, and the men had been friendly and grateful. A book appeared to which chaplains of the various denominations contributed, but the Catholic contribution was finally refused and became a book on its own¹⁴.

In their separate book, Catholic chaplains had a different story to tell:

Our chaplains had much to tell of the desire of the Catholics for the last sacraments, of the number of others asking for baptism. It looked as though a unique opportunity was offering for the Church [...]¹⁵.

Thus according to Maisie Ward, the general religious reaction to the War was real but superficial. The Catholic body, on the other hand, was in good shape, and – confirming Browne’s contemporary assessment – optimistic about the future.

The first of the two books mentioned above by Maisie Ward was an official report, *The Army and Religion. An Inquiry of its Bearing upon the Religious Life of the Nation* (Macmillan, 1919). The second is the Catholic complement to the aforementioned official report, *Catholic Soldiers. By Sixty Chaplains and Many Others*; edited by C.D. Plater, S.J. (Longmans, 1919). They were both reviewed by the Catholic con-

¹² The writer Maisie Ward (1889-1975) was the daughter of the editor of the Dublin Review, Wilfrid Ward, who was himself the son of the prominent Oxford Movement convert and writer W.G. Ward. Her books include *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (1943) and *Unfinished Business* (1964). With Frank Sheed she compiled and edited the *Catholic Evidence Training Outlines* (1934). Cfr. D. GREENE, ‘Ward [married name Sheed], Mary Josephine [Maisie] (1889-1975), writer and publisher’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online [http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101045905/Mary-Ward] [accessed 21 February 2014].

¹³ M. WARD, *Unfinished Business*, London, 1964, p. 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

vert writer C.C. Martindale, S.J., in the April 1920 issue of the *Dublin Review*^{16,17}. A third book was reviewed with it, an independent work, *Standing By*, by an Anglican chaplain, the Rev. Robert Keable (Nisbet, 1919). Martindale confirms Maisie Ward's statement that the official report, *The Army and Religion*, did not use Catholic evidence, adding that this was presumably because it was 'so different in character from the rest'.¹⁸ This report, according to Martindale, shows that for non-Catholic soldiers there was no really positive effect arising out of the war. Religious practice among soldiers, he writes (summarizing the report), 'rose sharply at the beginning of the war, then soared even higher, then dipped quite low; then it rose again under the impact of American idealism; then sank once more, until the Armistice drove it lower down than ever'¹⁹.

Catholic soldiers, according to Martindale's review, were much more constant. The chaplains in their separate report tell stories of how they exercised their ministry. One of them relates how he came across some American troops in occupied France, and offered to visit their camp three miles away to hear confessions. He heard confessions from 6.00pm to half-past midnight, walked back to his quarters, and then returned at 5.00am to give Holy Communion to the soldiers²⁰. Another gave retreats by instalments regularly, to four or five men at a time, after their day's work. He gave meditation points for some twenty minutes, and the men prayed for a further fifteen. The meditations varied in number from twelve to twenty, spread out over three to seven days; he would get through one or two such retreats each week.²¹ In contrast the Anglican chaplains seemed not to have known exactly what to do: Keable visited a camp hospital, and would have liked to give the sacraments to the men (he was a High Anglican, and prayed the Rosary); but the men instead asked him to 'give water, light cigarettes, if I could, pray'²².

Another contrast appeared in morals. 'Ill behaviour', writes Martindale, 'has seemed so "natural" that non-Catholic guides, themselves at sea about real princi-

¹⁶ C.C. MARTINDALE, 'After-War Religion', *Dublin Review* 166 (April 1920) pp. 161-181. Cyril Martindale (1879-1963) converted to Catholicism at 18 years of age. He became a Jesuit and was ordained priest in 1911. He was the author of over eighty books. He has been called 'the most famous English Jesuit of the twentieth century'. T. CORBISHLEY, 'Martindale, Cyril Charlie (1879-1963), Jesuit and scholar', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online, [http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101034911/Cyril-Martindale] [accessed 21 February 2014].

¹⁷ Founded in 1836, the *Dublin Review* was an influential Catholic periodical which was published (despite its name) in London.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

²² *Ibid.*, 170.

ples, have lost their bearings.’ Catholic soldiers who went out with a girl knew how to behave, especially considering that they could be dead tomorrow and would have to account for their lives. Non-Catholic soldiers were more prone to live for the day, ironically for the very same reason: tomorrow they might be dead.²³ Martindale adds that there were, mentioned in the reports, darker shades among Catholics as well, and bright spots among non-Catholics, which he has not mentioned in his review. But on the whole, Catholic soldiers passed the test of war, and this gave Catholics a certain moral ascendancy: their colleagues were aware that their Faith had helped them in trying times.

About this last point Maisie Ward, writing many years later, and thus with hindsight, was more circumspect: according to her it eventually became ‘evident that the splendid deathbeds of our soldiers gave no evidence of their ability to show these outsiders what it was that enabled them to die so well or why the Faith made living better for Catholics than for the rest of the world’. According to her, people were impressed, but did not readily progress from that point to becoming Catholics themselves²⁴.

Catholic military Chaplains had ‘a good war’. In the year after the armistice, the *Dublin Review* ran three articles on these priests, several of whom died in the course of their duties. Chaplains featured in the series included Fathers William Doyle, S.J., Charles Whiteford, Robert Monteith, S.J., Laurence O’Dea²⁵, Denis Doyle, John Gwynn, S.J., Bertie Collins²⁶, Bernard Kavanagh, C.S.SR., and Simon Knapp, O.Carm²⁷. Fr. William Doyle in particular achieved lasting international fame for the heroic manner of his life and death²⁸. The English writer Rudyard Kipling, who was not especially favourable to Catholicism, admired the heroism in the line of fire of Fr. John Gwynn, and eulogized his ‘utterly selfless’ character in his history of the Irish Guards in the First World War²⁹. With representatives such as Doyle, Gwynn, and others like them, Catholicism had risen to the occasion. On the other hand, Kipling seems to have felt that the Anglican

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ M. WARD, *Unfinished Business*, London, 1964, p. 80.

²⁵ ‘Chaplains in the Great War’, Part I, *Dublin Review* 164 (February 1919) pp. 82-105.

²⁶ ‘Chaplains in the Great War’, Part II, *Dublin Review* 164 (April 1919) pp. 287-298.

²⁷ ‘Chaplains in the Great War’, Part III, *Dublin Review* 165 (July 1919) pp. 52-66.

²⁸ For more on Fr Doyle, see the well-known biography, A. O’RAHILLY, *Father William Doyle S.J.*, London, 1922. This book went through four editions and many more reprints, and was also published in Spanish, French, German and Polish. Later studies include *Merry in God: A Life of Fr William Doyle, S.J.*, London, 1939 (published anonymously), and K.V. TURLEY, *Fr Willie Doyle & World War 1: A Chaplain’s Story*, Catholic Truth Society pamphlet, London 2014. Cfr. also D. MURPHY, ‘Doyle, William Joseph Gabriel’, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, online [<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a2761#>] [accessed 21 February 2014].

²⁹ R. KIPLING, *The Irish Guards in the Great War* (2 vols.), London, 1923, vol. 1, p. 118. Kipling’s son died while fighting in the regiment.

Church had ‘thrown away its chance in the War’, as had Freemasonry, of which he was an adherent³⁰.

On the basis of the sources cited so far, a change in the climate of opinion in favour of Catholicism appears well attested, but there are several strands of thought which need to be disentangled. First, if some of the change was due to the War, had other factors also been at work? Second, contributing to the effect of the War, Browne cites several factors. One was the testimony of Catholics, whether soldiers or civilians. A second was the take-up of Catholic practices by the general populace, especially prayers for the dead. The third factor was a perceived failure of Protestantism, a notion which was evidently mixed up with anti-German feeling.

On the first question, Frank Sheed, whom we have already quoted above, wrote that in the two decades between the world wars there was, he wrote, ‘a lightness of heart of which today’s Catholics can have no conception’³¹. However, his analysis of causes is quite different, and is related to the so-called ‘Catholic literary revival’, which, although it was to accelerate in the 1920s, had already begun before the War, with the writings of R.H. Benson, Hilaire Belloc and – although he was not yet a Catholic – G.K. Chesterton. Ronald Knox had also joined their ranks by 1917. Sheed wrote: ‘Chesterton and Belloc writing from the beginning of the century and Ronald Knox from its teens had done more than their share of bringing mirth into the Faith. But soon there were any number of others’³². There were also converts, Sheed added, on the Continent: ‘In Europe there were François Mauriac, Léon Bloy (who helped in the conversion of Jacques Maritain and his wife), [Charles] Péguy, Henri Ghéon, Giovanni Papini, Gertrud von Le Fort, Sigrid Undset’³³. Some of their books were translated and published by Sheed & Ward. Sheed marvelled at the ‘Catholic intellectual revival’ of which his publishing house was itself one of the signs. ‘By 1926, when Sheed & Ward began publishing’, he wrote, ‘the Revival and our happiness in it were both at the flood’³⁴. In summary, Sheed attributed the change not to the War but to the effect of the renaissance in Catholic writing which took place at the same time. Sheed was Australian, and he had arrived in Britain only in 1920, so he had not experienced the War through British eyes; but evidently he was not wholly wrong. The parallel intellectual and literary revivals, which he saw at first hand, had a strong revitalizing effect on early-to mid-twentieth century Catholicism³⁵.

³⁰ R. KIPLING, ‘In the Interests of the Brethren’, *Debits and Credits*, London, 1926, pp. 47-66, at p. 66. One of the characters in this short story states that Freemasonry has squandered the opportunity afforded by the War ‘almost as much as the Church has’.

³¹ SHEED, *The Church and I*, p. 107.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁵ The Catholic ‘Literary Revival’ has been sufficiently analysed elsewhere, in works such as J. PEARCE, *Literary Converts*, London 1999, and I.T. KER, *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845-1961*, Leominster, 2003.

However, other voices, more contemporary with events than were Sheed's much later memoirs, echo Browne's statement that the War was indeed responsible for a new climate of opinion with respect to Catholicism, and they also reproduced some of Browne's more detailed observations. One of them was none other than the most prominent of the Catholic apologist writers, G.K. Chesterton. Writing when already a Catholic in the *Dublin Review* in 1925, he echoed one of Browne's statements: the 'people of the Great War' had taken up the Catholic practice of prayers for the dead³⁶. The wayside war shrines and makeshift street memorials erected during the conflict, and which were especially favoured by the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, have now in good measure disappeared³⁷. However, in support of Chesterton's assertion one can still point to the practice of the two minutes of silence on Armistice Day, and the existence of a war memorial in virtually every town in England, a culturally Protestant country where people were formerly taught not to pray for the dead³⁸. With respect to another of Browne's causes, the alleged failure of other forms of religion, a promotional leaflet produced anonymously by the *Catholic Truth Society* in 1922 is brutally specific about which other forms of religion had failed: 'the Great War', it stated, 'had shown the bankruptcy of the religions derived from Luther'³⁹.

One may ask whether there was a temporary effect at work. Browne, writing in 1921, could perceive the effect of the War. Sheed, writing in 1975, did not cite it because by then it was hidden behind something else: to use another metaphor, likening the effect to a wave of self-confidence among Catholics, its energy was, within a few years, transferred elsewhere. We have seen that some of it went into the foundation of the Catholic Evidence Guild. It is reasonable to ask whether it also flowed into the Catholic literary revival.

The final strand in the question about the effect of the War is the perceived failure of 'the religions derived from Luther'. How much of the favourable sentiment was connected with the surprising fact that Britain was fighting with traditionally Catholic – whatever their current régimes – allies, France and Italy – to say nothing of Belgium (of which more later) – against Germany, which was perceived as being Protestant?

³⁶ G.K. CHESTERTON, 'Roman Converts', *Dublin Review* 176 (January 1925) pp. 1-21, at pp. 1-2.

³⁷ Cfr. A. KING, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance*, Oxford, 1998, p. 47.

³⁸ War memorials and the two minutes of silence *per se* are not prayer for the dead, but they are at least ambiguous and provide possibly useful cover for the practice. It was a lapsed Catholic colonial administrator, Percy FitzPatrick, who proposed the armistice day two minutes' silence to the British Government: cfr. S. TRAPIDO, 'FitzPatrick, Sir (James) Percy (1862-1931), politician in South Africa and author', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101033157/Percy-FitzPatrick>] [accessed 21 February 2014].

³⁹ ANON., *The C.T.S. and its Work*, London, 1922, p. 6.

The evidence for this reflexive effect of the War itself on English popular opinion is very strong. Wilfrid Ward⁴⁰, as Editor of the *Dublin Review*, wrote the following passage in an opinion piece after the first half-year of the War:

The stories which reached us early in the present campaign of appalling atrocities on the part of the German soldiery [...] were for a time received by level-headed men with some incredulity. [...] The home of Goethe, Heine and Schiller; of Kant and Hegel; of Beethoven, Bach and Wagner, had long perhaps been unduly idealized by Englishmen as the normal centre of European culture. And, on the face of it, it seemed absurd to suppose that the land of poets and philosophers, the chosen home of musical genius should have barbarians for its soldiers. The comparison of the race which claimed to be the apostle of culture to the savage Huns, which was early made, appeared even ludicrous⁴¹.

But it was clear by the end of the article that Ward did accept at least some of the allegations, and that this had become the consensus among educated Englishmen.

The anti-German argument had several strands in it which favoured Catholicism. Firstly, even though England had a much smaller Catholic population than had Germany, both in absolute and in percentage terms, the English, by and large, seem to have believed in a Prussian 'Protestant' caricature. Catholic Germans, opined the *Dublin Review*, were in a painful position. They had defeated Bismarck and 'compelled recognition of the rights of Catholics to be counted as true citizens of their country', although they were 'still subjected to many injustices in their public life'⁴². German Catholics could thus be easily absolved of responsibility for whatever their Protestant rulers might decide to do in the cause of war⁴³.

⁴⁰ Wilfrid Ward (1856-1916) was Maisie Ward's father. He wrote acclaimed biographies of Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman and of Cardinal John Henry Newman. Eventually he became Editor of the *Dublin Review* (1906-1915), following in the footsteps of his father William ('W.G.') Ward. Cfr. S. GILLEY, 'Ward, Wilfrid Philip (1856-1916), biographer and ecclesiastical historian', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online [http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101036737/Wilfrid-Ward] [accessed 21 February 2014].

⁴¹ W. WARD, 'The Conduct of German Soldiery', *Dublin Review* 156 (January 1915) pp. 30-56, at p. 30.

⁴² 'German Catholics and the War', *Dublin Review* 158 (January 1916) pp. 13-35. The article is unsigned.

⁴³ Cfr. *ibid.* The surprising thing about this argument is that, as far as Catholics are concerned, it could be applied equally to the Britain of 1915 – and even more so to Ireland. There seems to have been a notion abroad in England, among both Catholics and Protestants, that Germany was more anti-Catholic than was the United Kingdom; this was at least doubtful, even allowing for the *Kulturkampf* of the preceding generation. On the institutional level, Catholics were excluded from certain positions at the top end of public life, such as the lord chancellorship, and the lord lieutenantancy of Ireland. Added to this, on the personal level prejudice was commonly encountered: General Haig was perceptibly anti-Catholic: cfr. SNAPE, 'British Catholicism', pp. 329-330. William Doyle, despite the nearly unanimous opinion of all who had met him, was refused a posthumous Victoria Cross, it was said, owing to the 'triple disqualification of being an Irishman, a Catholic and a Jesuit': O'RAHILLY, *Father William Doyle S.J.*, p. 330.

Secondly, the British, for the first time in centuries, found themselves fighting alongside allies that were considered Catholic. That was perhaps more a matter of perception than of reality. As the Catholic Bishop of Southwark discovered when he toured Spain in 1915, conservative Catholic opinion in that country was largely behind Germany, as the defender of Christian Europe, alongside Habsburg Austria, against the atheistic French, and by extension the British⁴⁴. However, viewed from London, France was regarded as a Catholic country, Italy even more so; at any rate, they were certainly not Protestant. Furthermore, as the *Dublin Review* noted, the U.S.A was also increasingly Catholic in its make-up:

It was a surprise, when the American forces began to pour through England on their way to the Front, to find that nearly half their army, and more than half their navy, were Catholics; and that a purely Catholic organization, the Knights of Columbus, was able to claim an equal share with the YMCA in providing for the troops [social services]. [...] We had been so long accustomed to think and speak of the United States as a Protestant Power, that we found it hard to realize that it is already very largely a Catholic Power⁴⁵.

Thirdly, it was said that the Germans had behaved abominably in invading neutral Belgium; and Belgium was a Catholic country. Britain received many Belgian refugees. Cardinal Mercier's pastoral letter on the Martyrdom of Belgium was widely noted in Britain and created a big impression. He wrote to his people, 'in truth, our soldiers are our heroes. A first time, at Liege, they saved France; a second time, in Flanders, they arrested the advance of the enemy on Calais. France and England know it; and Belgium stands before them both, and before the entire world, as a nation of heroes'⁴⁶. Cardinal Mercier continued: 'Oh, all too easily do I understand how natural instinct rebels against the evils that have fallen upon Catholic Belgium; the spontaneous thought of mankind is ever that virtue should have its instantaneous crown, and injustice its immediate retribution. But God's ways are not our ways, the Scripture tells us'⁴⁷. If the suffering of Belgium was in itself not a strong argument to become a Catholic, at least it could be cast as a reproach against Protestants.

Catholics were not slow to make use of anti-German feeling in the Catholic cause. One commentator wrote in the *Dublin Review*:

Three times since Christianity came into the world, the nations around the Mediterranean and the Celtic races of Northern Europe, have been violently attacked, and each time the intention has been to destroy Mediterranean, or perhaps one should say Celt-

⁴⁴ M. CLIFTON, *Amigo – Friend of the Poor: Bishop of Southwark 1904–1949*, Leominster, 1987, pp. 57–65.

⁴⁵ F.W., 'Impressions of Catholic America', *Dublin Review* 164 (April 1919) pp. 161–183, at p. 161.

⁴⁶ W. WARD, 'Cardinal Mercier on the Martyrdom of Belgium', *Dublin Review* 156 (April 1915) pp. 217–226, at p. 220.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

ic-Latin, religion and civilization. Each time the attack has come from the same quarter, from the North and the North-East, and each time it has come from the same race, the Teutons. [...] But the extraordinary thing to note is that those who have attacked Christendom have called themselves in every case Christians [...]. But the Christianity which has been the religion of the dominant caste has been in every case what Catholics call heresy⁴⁸.

The writer made it clear that he was referring to the taking of Rome in 430, the sack of Rome in 1527, and the Great War. This is a selective and strange list; one might quibble that the attacks of the Huns, the Vikings, the Saracens and the Magyars are omitted, to name other examples of civilization-threatening attacks *not* carried out by Germans^{49,50}.

There is no question that anti-German feeling in England caused some re-evaluation with respect to German religion; it even gave rise to speculation with regard to the race to which the English belonged. Could they really be a teutonic people from Germanic lands, as hitherto believed? Might it not be that the English were Celts after all? The most influential of such attempts at revisionism was Hilaire Belloc's *Europe and the Faith*, which argued on two fronts: firstly, that Europe was the Catholic continuation of the Roman Empire, and that it would not be complete again until England's reconversion to Catholicism; and secondly, that by race the English were mainly Celts rather than Anglo-Saxons⁵¹. A commentator writing in 1926 found it necessary to protest at this emotive approach to questions of fact:

Not many years ago, before the war, the best historians in all countries were agreed, with slight shades of difference, that the settlement of the transmarine Saxons and Jutes and Angles in this country was one, east of the line of the Severn, of a very complete, population-changing kind. [...] Then came war against the Germans, for the first time of our history, in alliance with French and Italians, and after that a new view has caught on with numbers of people not well enough educated to distinguish between

⁴⁸ S.W. FAY, 'The Genesis of the Super-German', *Dublin Review* 162 (April 1918) pp. 224-233, at p. 224. The author, Mgr Sigourney Fay, lived and worked in the U.S.A.; he was a priest of Baltimore Archdiocese.

⁴⁹ The Vikings might be considered 'Teutons' in the wider sense but they were presumably not useful for the anti-German case Fay wanted to make.

⁵⁰ An English reader of the *Dublin Review* (which was published in London), convinced about the righteousness of the Allied cause, would naturally read Fay's argument as an apology for Catholicism. However, an Irish or Irish-American reader, convinced about Catholicism but not necessarily about the Allied cause, could well read it the other way round, as a justification for supporting the British war effort against Germany. Either way, the argument places the Germans and Catholic Christendom on opposing sides. It has been suggested that the article was written with Irish Catholic readers principally in mind; cfr. M. RENELLA, *The Boston Cosmopolitans: International Travel and American Arts and Letters*, New York, 2008, pp. 174-175.

⁵¹ The edition cited here is H. BELLOC, *Europe and the Faith*, London, 1920.

current feelings and scientific history, and moreover always apt to take the word of a self-convinced writer who is master of a lucid and brilliantly dogmatic style, such as Hilaire Belloc, himself a Frenchman by origin, though an enthusiastic south Saxon by residence, adoption and grace⁵².

Europe and the Faith is indeed a masterpiece of polemical writing. Belloc had a serious reason for his attack. His real target was English anti-Catholic historiography. He was fighting back against the twin ideas that ‘the Reformation was the revolt of a race – and a strong and conquering race – against the decaying traditions of Rome’⁵³, and that England’s sixteenth century religious severance from Europe was already ‘predestined by race’ after the invasions of the fifth century⁵⁴.

It is impossible to make any sense at all of European history, if we accept that story of the decline [of the Roman Empire] which [...] has seemed sufficient to anti-Catholic historians.

Their version is, briefly, this: The Roman Empire, becoming corrupt and more vicious through the spread of luxury and through a sort of native weakness to be discovered in the very blood of the Mediterranean, was at last invaded and overwhelmed by young and vigorous tribes of Germans. These brought with them all the strength of those native virtues which later rejected the unity of Christendom and began the modern Protestant societies. [...] ⁵⁵

[The] most complete, most fruitful, and most satisfactory of all (they tell us) was the eruption of these vigorous and healthy pagans into the outlying province of Britain, which they wholly conquered; exterminating its original inhabitants and colonising it with their superior stock⁵⁶.

Instead, Belloc argues, there was no general invasion. All that broke down was Roman rule; but everything else remained. The island was cut off from civilization for a time by the Saxon settlements on the east coast; when civilization returned it arrived through those settlements, after which it was able to advance westward across the island again, led this time by the Catholic Church. But, said Belloc, ‘of colonisation, of the advance of a race, there was none’. What advanced was the old organisation once more, ‘and with it the dialects of the courts it now favoured’⁵⁷. Thus the language changed, but not the people, not the race. The population re-

⁵² B. HOLLAND, ‘Who are the English?’, *Dublin Review* 178 (April 1926) pp. 254-270, at p. 254.

⁵³ BELLOC, *Europe and the Faith*, p. 167.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵⁵ Belloc is not at all unfair in his description of distorted popular historiography. For a representative example, expounded in almost the same words, albeit at greater length, see the Preface of a well-known anti-Catholic novel: C. KINGSLEY, *Hyppatia: or, New Foes with an Old Face* (2 vols.), London, 1853, vol. 1, Preface, especially pp. 14-17.

⁵⁶ BELLOC, *Europe and the Faith*, pp. 95-96.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

mained primarily Celtic as before. After attacking the generally accepted opinion that the English are mainly of Germanic origin, Belloc proceeds to argue that there was nothing in common between the revolt of Germany and the 'defection' of England. The English Reformation was a tragic accident, a disaster not just for England, but for the whole of Europe.

The tone of the book is generally moderate, although Belloc's antipathy towards 'Prussia' is clearly revealed in the Introduction⁵⁸. As a Frenchman, his dislike of Germany in fact took its rise from the Franco-Prussian War, although he doubtless felt vindicated by the Great War⁵⁹. Whether or not Belloc was correct in his discussion of the race of the English – recent studies suggest that he may have had more of a point than his adversaries were willing to allow – the post-War climate certainly ensured a ready hearing for Belloc's arguments⁶⁰. *Europe and the Faith*, written within two years of the 1918 Armistice, should probably be considered the outstanding work by which the energizing effect of the Great War was received and taken into the accelerating Catholic literary revival. The critic in the Dublin Review did not question the assertion for which Belloc's classic is best known today: 'The Faith is Europe. And Europe is the Faith'⁶¹. To the extent that Belloc's book is still considered classic reading, it is arguable that the War's legacy survives in English-language Catholic culture nearly a century later.

In summary, the Great War produced in England a favourable change in attitudes toward Catholics and even to their religious and devotional practices, and resulted in a new optimism among Catholics themselves. This shift in itself would probably have been of little importance. But some of its inchoate energy was harnessed by the Catholic Evidence Guild, and, through Hilaire Belloc and those who followed him, it was also transmitted into Catholic historiography and from there into the literary revival. Thus the change in the atmosphere was successfully channeled into concrete modes of expression in the sphere of apologetics, and some of its effects are still with us today.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Introduction, pp. 8-14.

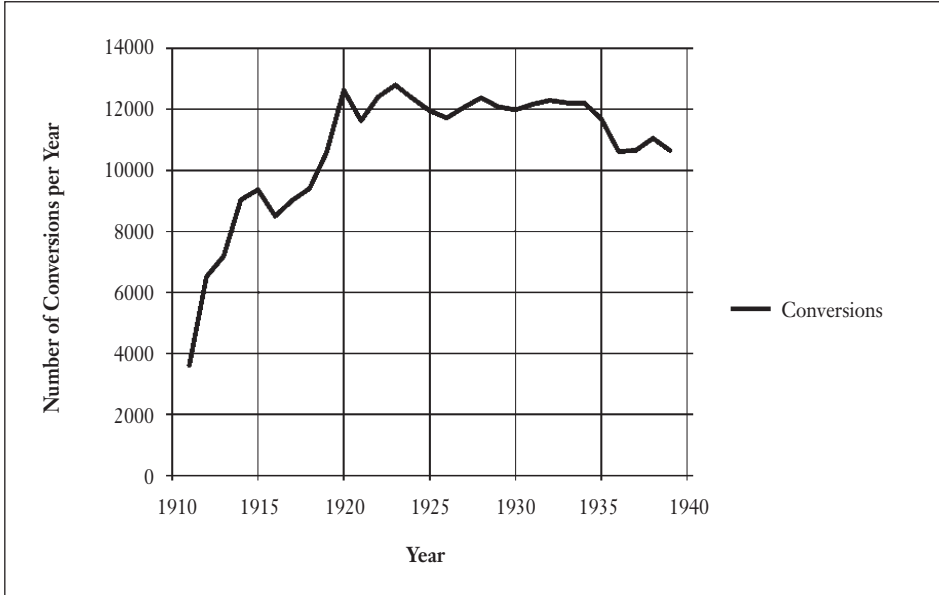
⁵⁹ Belloc's 'lifelong prejudice against all things German' was due to the war of 1870; the family home near Paris was ransacked by Prussian soldiers. B. BERGONZI, 'Belloc (Joseph) Hilaire Pierre René (1870-1953), poet and author', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online [http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101030699/Hilaire-Belloc] [accessed 21 February 2014].

⁶⁰ This topic is still being debated, but it is becoming increasingly accepted that the Anglo-Saxon settlement was the mass adoption of the culture of what was originally a favoured minority, rather than a mass migration that displaced the native peoples. For more on this, cfr. S. OPPENHEIMER, *The Origins of the British: A Genetic Detective Story*, London, 2006.

⁶¹ BELLOC, *Europe and the Faith*, p. 331.

APPENDIX

Figures of Total Annual Adult Conversions for the Dioceses of England and Wales, 1911-1939



National Catholic Directory, annual publication 1913-1941, all statistics reported for two years earlier, 1911-1939.