

Ronald Knox: A Bibliographic Essay

by James Chappel

Ronald Arbuthnott Knox (1888-1957) was the public face of Catholicism in England for many years. The son of an Anglican bishop, he converted in 1917 and became a priest soon after. Unusual for a Catholic clergyman, his sparkling literary career impacted English intellectual life over the succeeding decades as his unique combination of encyclopedic knowledge and incisive wit—*The Daily Mail* once referred to him as “the wittiest man in England”—made him one of the premier public intellectuals of his time.¹ A primary assumption made in this bibliographic essay will be that his achievement cannot be understood on its own, as he was part of a remarkably fertile outburst of Catholic intellectual activity in England in the first half of the twentieth century. His writings and influence have been vast, and the interested reader would likely feel disoriented when confronted with the great quantity of material—both primary and secondary—available. This essay is designed to introduce the reader to Ronald Knox. In the first section, relevant contextual literature will be discussed, while in the second section the focus will be on Knox’s most indispensable work. Last, secondary literature on Knox himself will be explored.

I: THE CATHOLIC CONTEXT

Ronald Knox was only one of many prominent converts to Catholicism in the early years of the twentieth century, leading some to claim that the Catholic faith had, paradoxically, become fashionable in steadfastly Protestant England. As mentioned above, Knox cannot be profitably studied apart from this context: his conversion was tied, both historically and conceptually, to those of R.H. Benson, G.K. Chesterton, and others. In this section, the most helpful secondary sources dealing with this revival of English Catholicism will be listed and briefly described.

The efflorescence of talented Catholic intellectuals in early twentieth century England is sometimes referred to as the “Third Spring,” in reference to John Henry Newman’s famous 1852 sermon, “The Second Spring.” Adam Schwartz employs this as the title for his own work, *The Third Spring: G.K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, and David Jones* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005). This thorough study is an admirable introduction to the most significant Catholic thinkers of England between the first and second world wars. A similar account can be found in *The Catholic Revival in English Literature*, by Ian Ker (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003). Ker helpfully traces the interwar revival back to its nineteenth century roots, with Gerard Manley Hopkins serving as a transition figure between Newman (1801-90) and the interwar writers of the Third Spring. *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* by Joseph Pearce (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999) deals with Knox at greater length than Ker or Schwartz, and three chapters are explicitly devoted to placing him in the context of Catholic and English intellectual life. Humphrey Carpenter, in *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh and His Friends* (London: Weidenfeld, 1989), provides a group biography of Waugh and his contemporaries, Knox included, which is notable for its evocative depiction of Oxford’s cultural and intellectual ferment during the years Knox lived there.

One shortcoming of these works is that they are quite insular, failing to take into account either international Catholicism or British Protestantism. Patrick Allitt partially corrects this oversight in his *Catholic Converts:*

¹ Cited in Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Knox Brothers*, (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 173.

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British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). He points out the many connections between the Catholic revivals in Britain and America, focusing on Knox as a representative figure. For instance, he uses the image of the “Spiritual Aeneid”—the title of Knox’s autobiography—as a metonym for the English convert tradition as a whole. The Protestant context is also essential to any understanding of Knox, who began his career as an internal critic of Protestantism. Of course, the literature on English Protestant theology is enormous. When read together, B.H. Reardon’s *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: A Survey from Coleridge to Gore* (New York: Longman, 1980) and Peter Hinchliff’s *God and History: Aspects of British Theology, 1875-1914* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1992) provide the necessary context for understanding Knox. The best overview of English Christianity as a whole during this period can be found in *A History of English Christianity: 1920-1985*, by Adrian Hastings (London: Collins, 1986).

II: RONALD KNOX: PRIMARY SOURCES

In addition to studies that focus on Knox’s historical context, those wishing to engage in a thorough study of this fascinating figure have access to his own works. Knox was an exceptionally prolific writer. A full bibliography, which I have compiled based on an unpublished version prepared by Patricia Cowan in 1964, can now be accessed at the website of the Ronald Knox Society of North America (www.ronaldknoxsociety.com). It runs to well over one thousand items, including over eighty books, and more will inevitably come to light in the future. His literary output is as varied as it is massive: he published stories, novels, sermons, poems, reviews, and, most spectacularly, a full translation of the Bible from the Vulgate. While the space allotted here does not allow for more than a sketch of his *oeuvre*, a few of his most significant works are highlighted. Original publication data is given, while the bibliography at the end of the essay will list the most recent edition.

Readers interested primarily in Knox’s apologetics should begin with *The Belief of Catholics* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), the most extensive defense of Catholicism, and the fullest description of his own version of it, he ever wrote. Those seeking more detail might look at *Proving God: A New Apologetic* (London: The Month, 1960). Knox was working on this when he died and the fragments were assembled posthumously by Evelyn Waugh, who also provides a preface. *Difficulties: Being a Correspondence about the Catholic Religion between Ronald Knox and Arnold Lunn* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952) consists of a series of letters between Knox and Lunn, then a rather agnostic Protestant who had earlier attacked Knox and other converts. Knox was not, however, primarily a theologian, and was more at home preaching than speculating. These shorter, more informal works can most conveniently be found in *In Soft Garments* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1942) and *The Hidden Stream* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1952), two collections of his Oxford conferences. In addition, a collection of Knox’s sermons has been recently published as *Pastoral and Occasional Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002).

Knox was not merely known in Catholic circles, as his work was widely read outside the small Catholic community in England. His early work is mostly satirical in tone, and can best be found in *Essays in Satire* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1928). This early collection includes “Absolute and Abitophell,” his early Dryden-inspired mockery of theological modernism, and the famous essay, “The Authorship of ‘In Memoriam,’” in which he uses the most up-to-date tools of textual criticism to prove that the poem in question had been written by Queen Victoria. His middle period might best be represented by *Caliban in Grub Street* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930) and *Broadcast Minds* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1932). Each of these essay collections turns satire to a serious purpose, as Knox ruthlessly criticizes certain popular commentators on Christian topics and, in the latter book, presciently sounds a

warning about the possible misuse of mass media. Readers might then turn to the end of his career and his *God and the Atom* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1945). This essay, written at an uncharacteristically fevered pitch, represents Knox's thoughtful and anguished engagement with the bombing of Hiroshima.

Lastly, readers should consider Knox's more properly literary achievements. He was an accomplished writer of detective stories, of which the best known is probably *Footsteps at the Lock* (London: Methuen, 1928). Among his novels, *Let Dons Delight* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939) remains the most widely read. In addition, one should consult *A Spiritual Aeneid* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1918), a memoir of his youth in the Anglican Church and his painful conversion to Catholicism. Those researching Knox, however, may consult not only the few of his publications highlighted here, but also several outstanding secondary studies about the life of this notable priest and his contribution to the Third Spring.

III: SECONDARY LITERATURE ON KNOX

In the preface to his biography of Knox, Evelyn Waugh wrote, "This book, I surmise, will prove to be the forerunner of many weightier studies on him."² In the end, this has not quite come true, as Waugh's biography remains the standard source on Knox's life. There have, however, been numerous contributions that flesh out Waugh's treatment. These will be detailed in the following section, which includes the most significant secondary literature on Knox.

Waugh's *Monsignor Ronald Knox* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1959) remains a useful source. It is quite thorough and clearly written from a position of great knowledge of, and sympathy with, his subject. It was subject to criticism from other Catholics, so it should be read along with Derek Worlock's assessment in "Pulpit Beyond the Grave" which appeared in the 1960 *Dublin Review* (Vol. 234, No. 486: 372-8). The most significant biographical work to appear since Waugh's is Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Knox Brothers* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1977), written before she became a Booker Prize-winning novelist. It is a group portrait of the four Knox brothers, one of whom was Fitzgerald's father, and thus provides less specific information on Ronald Knox than Waugh does. It does provide, however, a remarkable evocation of the Edwardian period in which the brothers matured. It is also more anecdotal and occasionally judgmental than Waugh's solemn account. Those looking for a shorter overview of Knox's life and career can read Sheridan Gilley's excellent article on Knox in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Several other monographs have appeared since Waugh's, valuable in that they all focus on different aspects of Knox's life and work; none of them, however, attempt the sort of synoptic overview provided by Waugh and Fitzgerald. In *Ronald Knox: The Priest [and] Writer* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965), Thomas Corbishley and Robert Speaight explore Knox's two professional identities. Corbishley examines Knox's clerical activities, largely downplayed in other accounts. He was a friend of Knox, and a fellow priest; his account is predictably sympathetic and anecdotal. In addition, he provides a helpful discussion of Knox's apologetics in the context of his life as a priest. Robert Speaight's work on Knox treats him as a literary figure, covering much of the work that was not explicitly clerical: the novels, stories, satire, and translations. Susan Oleksiw, herself an author of crime fiction, produced an article in this vein in a collection called *Mystery and Suspense Writers: The Literature of Crime, Detection, and Espionage* (New York: Scribner, 1998). She focuses on his "Decalogue," a set of rules for the writing of detective fiction, while also discussing his essays on Holmes and the way that Knox's Catholicism impacted his own detective fiction.

² Evelyn Waugh, *Monsignor Ronald Knox*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1959), 13.

The most recent monograph on Knox is Fr. Milton Walsh's *Ronald Knox as Apologist: Wit, Laughter, and the Popish Creed* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007). Walsh provides a helpful biographical summary, more sensitive to Knox's intellectual context than Fitzgerald or Waugh, before entering into a lengthy and detailed discussion of Knox's apologetics. He examines a wide variety of topics—including, among others, Knox's teachings on reason, the will, the intellect, and prophecy—making this the most extended and fruitful discussion of Knox's thought currently available. This was quickly followed by *Second Friends: C.S. Lewis and Ronald Knox in Conversation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), in which Walsh provides a fascinating tandem reading of two of England's most prominent twentieth century Christian thinkers.

The other set of works available treats Knox in his religious context. In the article "Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England, 1895-1913: Abbot Aelred Carlyle and the Monks of Caldey Island," Rene Kollar describes the Anglican monks of Caldey Island, whom Knox visited often between 1906 and 1910 during his Anglo-Catholic phase. Knox is quoted at length, and the article as a whole presents an interesting account of the tensions inherent in Anglo-Catholicism, which proved to be too much for Knox and the monks themselves, who converted to Roman Catholicism *en masse* in 1913 (*The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Apr., 1983): 205-224). Those interested in this topic should also read *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian* (London: Hutchinson, 1935), the autobiography of Edmund Knox, Ronald's father. In "'God and the Atom': British Churchmen and the Challenge of Nuclear Power, 1945-1950" (*Albion*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 422-457), Kirk Willis provides the context for Knox's *God and the Atom*, discussing its relationship with other religious responses to the atomic bomb.

CONCLUSION

In this bibliographic essay, readers are introduced to the most significant works by Ronald Knox, one of the foremost thinkers in the period known in England as the Third Spring. Also, the secondary literature necessary to fully understand his life and the context in which he was writing was presented since his contribution to religious literature cannot be fully appreciated apart from this remarkable period of history. Those seeking further information on Knox's literary output are encouraged to visit the website of the [Ronald Knox Society of North America](#) to find a full bibliography of his works.

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