

## Order and History

*A Historian and His World:  
A Life of Christopher Dawson*  
by Christina Scott.

New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992.

To sum up the life of Christopher Dawson is not an easy task. Every man's life is inseparable from his ideas. But in Dawson's case his vision—by which I mean the coherence of his ideas—not only influenced but governed his entire life. And now, in *A Historian and His World*—of which "A Life of Christopher Dawson" is a subtitle—his daughter Christina Scott succeeds marvelously. Her own biographical text is not much more than two hundred pages. Yet this reviewer makes bold to say that it fulfills all of the requirements for a biography of her father. Surely someone, someday, will attempt an 800-page (or more) biography of this important historian and thinker. Surely such a work will not be a waste of effort, and it may include certain details hitherto unknown. Still all of the essentials are here in this book, modestly and wonderfully crafted, full of affection and insight but also with a splendid kind of detachment, and excellently written.

All of this would be remarkable alone when considering the difficulties of a daughter writing about her father, with the need to eschew uncritical respect and admiration. It is more remarkable than that, because of Christina Scott's extraordinary knowledge of her father's work and ideas. I write "extraordinary" because, in many ways, we cannot expect the people closest

to us—spouses and children—to have read everything, and critically indeed, of what we have written; that is, to expatiate on the meaning of a husband or father's published work. The reason for this is—seemingly, but only seemingly—paradoxical. It is familiarity. What may be striking to others is commonplace within a family; they have heard those things and understood them long enough. Yet this book is not only fresh with insights. It is a first-class introduction to that enormous corpus of work within which we can discern Dawson's essential *idearium*. The great Jakob Burckhardt once wrote that the student of history must possess but one talent: *bisogna saper leggere*—he/she must know how to read. Christopher Dawson's daughter has passed this test with high honors.

Christopher Dawson was not a man of his time. Nor was he a period piece. Allow me to deal with the former statement first. Dawson was a late Victorian, by which I do not only mean that he was born in 1889. His childhood, his upbringing, his family, the surroundings, the climate, the atmosphere of his youth were, all, Victorian—in a now Arcadian and beautiful sense of that adject-

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tive. That, contra writers such as Lytton Strachey, was not a constraint but a tremendously vital asset in the lives of certain people, including the life of this otherwise unworldly man. The evidence is there in Dawson's own "Memories of a Victorian Childhood", a beautiful piece of writing, first published in this volume. It is full of precise and evocative descriptions of the houses and the counties he knew when he was a child. They include Wales, Wessex, and the West Riding of Yorkshire. His knowledge and feel for these lands, of the essence of those countryside, are amazing proofs of the rural affections of a man who led a bookish, in many ways closed, and sometimes even an ivory-tower-tinted life. Even in the beginning of this century the climate of Dawson's early youth was close not only to the world of *Kilvert's Diary* or to Trollope's Barchester but in some ways even to that of Jane Austen. And this, I repeat, was a very formative asset—because Dawson loved it and venerated it and sought no escape from it. There is a great difference between being a man for all seasons and being a man of one's own time. The latter, who fits in exactly with the customs and habits, including mental customs and habits of his own time will amount to little; he has no enduring values. That Christopher Dawson was not. He carried with himself not only a proper nostalgia (in the sense of the original Greek term: *nostos* + *algos*, a longing for home) but a tremendous inherited capital of Victorian classical learning.

Nor was he a period piece. He belonged—or, more precisely, he contributed to—a period of Catholic intellectual revival in England, in the 1930s, together with people whose names are now, alas, unknown to an entire generation of American Catholic intellectuals: D'Arcy, Jerrold, Burns, Watkin, and others, at a time when the Chesterton and Belloc years were passing. Dawson's mind and vision ranged wider than those of many others. He was a great historian. The

evidence is there in his books and articles. That evidence is so broad and so large that in any work, book, or article attempting to interpret Dawson's ideas the best and most apposite expositions of those ideas must be passages by Dawson himself. He once wrote, in a mildly critical article about that most pedestrian of living English modern historians Alan Bullock: "The academic historian is perfectly right in insisting on the importance of the techniques of historical criticism and research. But the mastery of these techniques will not produce great history, any more than a mastery of metrical technique will produce great poetry."

He was probably unaware that he was writing about himself. Yet he was very much aware that a largeness of vision is "the source of [the] creative power of any great historian."

Dawson's reputation was compromised by several handicaps, all of them severe ones. There was the fact of his conversion to Roman Catholicism that, at least for the greater part of his life, rendered him suspect to many English and American historians of the time, when anti-Catholicism was the anti-Semitism of many academics and intellectuals. There was the fact of his amateur historianship—of course, amateur in the best sense of this often misused adjective—at a time when professional academic and amateur literate historianship began to separate more and more in England, and especially in America. Many historians, on both sides of the Atlantic, dismissed him as some kind of a more-or-less erudite Catholic publicist and apologist. Regrettably, there were (and still are) other historians who did not only refuse to read him but who were unaware of his existence. The very fact that his knowledge and writing spread to so many fields made many academic historians and public thinkers suspicious of Christopher Dawson, whereby they thought it best not only to ignore him but to pay no

attention to him at all. (It is lamentable how many American Catholic academics are unaware of Dawson now, merely two decades after his death, considering that one generation ago he was venerated more in America than in England). There was the fact that throughout his life he was more often than not shy; he was far from being a good public speaker, and he mumbled a lot—not in his writing, of course. His courtship and love for his wife were old-fashioned and exemplary; but while he was impractical, his wife was frequently restless; they moved often, which had sometimes adverse effects on the quietude and comfort necessary for his work.

He could be sharp and cutting on occasion—mostly privately or in letters to friends, with the not infrequent result of a

few good aphorisms. But there was no evidence of a corroding bitterness in his writing, even when he could see—and how clearly!—the prospect of a New Dark Age unfolding. If his life was unmarked by triumphs of character, it was surely marked by a mind and a soul triumphant over adversity, because of a deep knowledge of Christian hope, of providential goodness, and of a sense of meaning in human history.

This excellent edition contains a fine short introduction by Russell Kirk, a very good short essay: "Christopher Dawson: The Historian of Ideas" by Professor James Oliver, and the above-mentioned lovable "Memories of a Victorian Childhood" by Dawson himself. The index could have been more complete, but the selected bibliography is scholarly and helpful.

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