

G.K. CHESTERTON



THE BALLAD OF
THE WHITE HORSE

IGNATIUS

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The Ballad of the White Horse is one of the last great epic poems in the English language. On the one hand it describes King Alfred's battle against the Danes in 878. On the other hand it is a timeless allegory about the ongoing battle between Christianity and the forces of nihilistic heathenism. Filled with colorful characters, thrilling battles and mystical visions, it is as lively as it is profound. Chesterton incorporates brilliant imagination, atmosphere, moral concern, chronological continuity, wisdom and fancy. He makes his stanzas reverberate with sound, and hurries his readers into the heart of the battle. This deluxe volume is the definitive edition of the poem. It exactly reproduces the 1928 edition with Robert Austin's beautiful woodcuts, and includes a thorough introduction and wonderful endnotes by Sister Bernadette Sheridan, from her 60 years researching the poem.

"When Chesterton writes poetry, he excels like no other modern writer. The rhyme, rhythm, alliteration and imagery are a complete joy to the ear. But *The Ballad of the White Horse* is not just a poem. It is a prophecy." —Dale Ahlquist, President, The American Chesterton Society

"Not only a charming poem and a great tale, this is a keystone work of Christian literature that will be read long after most of the books of our era are forgotten." —Michael O'Brien, Author, *Father Elijah*

The Ballad of the White Horse Details

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From Reader Review The Ballad of the White Horse for online ebook

Michael Jones says

This is one I read over and over when I retire but before sleep takes me. Truly one of Chesterton's greatest poetic works! In my estimation one of the best poetic works ever.

The fun part is that while it is terrific poetry, Chesterton also knew his stuff.

One of my favorite parts:

And as he wept for the woman
He let her business be,
And like his royal oath and rash
The good food fell upon the ash
And blackened instantly.

Screaming, the woman caught a cake
Yet burning from the bar,
And struck him suddenly on the face, Leaving a scarlet scar.

King Alfred stood up wordless, A man dead with surprise...

G. K. Chesterton. The Ballad of the White Horse (Kindle Locations 360-361).

the woman basically helps Alfred wake up and smell the coffee! After that, he takes on the fearsome Danes with unstoppable courage!

Mary Beth says

"One other consideration needs a note. Alfred has come down to us in the best way (that is, by national legends) solely for the same reason as Arthur and Roland and the other giants of that darkness, because he fought for the Christian civilization against the heathen nihilism." -G. K. Chesterton.

Such an excellent and exciting read, shedding keen light on one of my favorite and most respected historical figures. The ballad's light is keen indeed for it is both beautiful to behold and is yet instructive and enlightening.

Annette says

Poetry is not a genera I read with any frequency, and thus I was pleasantly surprised to find myself rather enjoying this long ballad concerning Alfred, an obscure (to me, anyway) and at least semi-mythical English king of yore. (In the foreword, Chesterton freely admits that historicity was not his foremost concern: the myth itself is more important to him than the facts of this king, long lost in the dark ages.) In it, Alfred and a

small group of his men fight a vastly superior force of Danes who are constantly invading, pillaging, and etc. There is a great amount of mocking from the heathen Danes to the Christian English: they claim that following the "dying God" has made them weak and helpless. Alfred's replies and the ballad's general defense of Christianity is well worth reading.

Here are just a few stanzas that struck me:

*"That on you is fallen the shadow,
And not upon the Name;
That though we scatter and though we fly,
And you hang over us like the sky,
You are more tired of victory,
Than we are tired of shame.*

...

*"Our monks go robed in rain and snow,
But the heart of flame therein,
But you go clothed in feasts and flames,
When all is ice within;*

*"Nor shall all iron dooms make dumb
Men wondering ceaselessly,
If it be not better to fast for joy
Than feast for misery.*

I was also pleasantly surprised to come across a stanza I've seen quoted quite out of context elsewhere on several occasions:

*For the great Gaels of Ireland
Are the men that God made mad,
For all their wars are merry,
And all their songs are sad.*

Watergirl says

This is my favorite poem of all time... How's that for a wide, sweeping statement? I'm sure I will have other favorites eventually, but I love it today ;)
I listen to it whenever I get the opportunity in my audiobooks app. I had to take it with a grain of salt at first due to the overt Catholic tendencies, but I have since come to love the poem and its ponderings on life. Beautiful and thank you, Chesterton! I think this was my intro to G.K. Chesterton.

Elisabeth says

Chesterton's poetry packs the same elegant punch as his fiction writing. As a Protestant, I wasn't as keen on the Catholic themes (for instance, the continual description of Christianity as something that originated in Rome), but overall the poem was marvelous. I loved the way Chesterton sketches the characters of the chieftains on both sides, so that the reader is thoroughly involved in their fate by the time they go into battle—and the language is full of breathtaking imagery and lines that stir the heart.

G.M. Burrow says

Chesterton's poetry rhymes like Modern English, but stalks with bold strides and rolls with deep rumbling like Old.

John says

I don't think the ballad format works for epic and in any event the poem was too long for the ballad format. The religious (read: Roman Catholic) content was a little too obvious for my liking. I like my battle scenes Homeric. I was also troubled by Alfred's "prophecy" of a future heathen invasion of England by people "with scroll and pen/And grave as a shaven clerk,/By this sign you shall know them,/That they ruin and make dark ... etc. I suspect Glenn Beck thinks this poem is great...

Alexandra says

"Pride flings frail palaces at the sky,
As a man flings up sand,
But the firm feet of humility
Take hold of heavy land."

Frances says

Absolutely masterful poetry and simply delightful turns of phrase. This is a wonderful little book of grand adventure and historical romance, at times reminiscent of C.S. Lewis's Narnia or Tolkien's Middle Earth. Despite the at-times faulty theology and literary license with historical fact, Chesterton is a master storyteller.

Elevenetha says

I've pretty much always known that I would love Chesterton's books. I just have. However, this being the

very first of Chesterton's books that I've read, it's official.

How on earth he managed to tell a brilliant but bloody tale in beautiful verse, I'll never know. (Also, my giddy heart filled with glee every time he rhymed a word with a name of a person or place. I don't even know why, but I really like that.)

I started this book and immediately had proof that I would love it when I read this:

*"Up through an empty house of stars,
Being what heart you are,
Up the inhuman steeps of space
As on a staircase go in grace,
Carrying the firelight on your face
Beyond the loneliest star."*

Which is part of the *dedication to his wife*.

And then there is one of my other favorite quotes:

*"The men of the East may spell the stars,
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed of the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark."*

And in any case, it's a gorgeous tale, best read aloud, and I heartily recommend to all.

Suzannah says

I can't believe it took me this long to read the whole thing, since it contains some of my very favourite Chesterton poetry. And yet, on finishing the whole thing, I have to admit that Tolkien's assessment was perfectly correct.

Full review now available at [Vintage Novels!](#)

Jeremy says

I read this edition first (ASIN: B00JL0PG6I).

Chesterton's account is clearly romanticized, and Chesterton projects his own modern concerns about secularism and nihilism. But the whole thing is a lot of fun. I know that I would not have enjoyed it so much if I had not been thinking about Alfred a lot already for an Old English presentation. Having read Ben Merkle's *The White Horse King* really helped prepare me to read Chesterton's poem.

I also read (and own) this edition (from April 4-13), which has annotations and sketches. Ralph Wood and Alison Milbank endorse this edition.

Forward

Introduction

Poetic Elements of the Ballad

Prefatory Note

Dedication: history vs. legend; legend and fairy tale; poets and subcreation

Book 1: The Vision of the King: short history of the White Horse; fall of Rome; mythical status of Alfred; invading Danes drove Alfred into Athelney (island); Mary appears (in the flowers/grass) to Alfred and gives him hope (although not a clear view of the future)

Book 2: The Gathering of the Chiefs: Alfred's 3 captains: Eldred (Saxon farmer), Mark (Roman noble), and Colan (converted Welsh Druid); Alfred keeps mentioning bad news as he recruits

Book 3: The Harp of Alfred: history of the White Horse; Guthrum and his 3 captains: Earl Harold, Earl Elf, and Earl Ogier; Alfred sings to them all as a minstrel in disguise; "Christian men / Guard even heathen things"

Book 4: The Woman in the Forest: references to Ethandune and Ashdown; peasant woman and the cakes; just as the Danish Vikings mistake his identity (in Book 3), so also does his own subject mistake his identity (Christlike? contributes to his "resurrection"); Alfred descends into "Hell" in one of the central books and learns humility (the woman is scarred and humbled too); Alfred's army gathers, and the Danes attack

Book 5: Ethandune: The First Stroke: despair because of the size of the Danish army; anxiety about (and different responses to) death/suffering; Alfred's and Eldred's confession of sins; different descriptions of burial (by Alfred's captains); initial meeting of the forces; Harold mocks Colan's appearance and attempts to shoot Colan with a bow; Colan throws his sword to kill Harold, and the Battle of Ethandune begins

Book 6: Ethandune: The Slaying of the Chiefs: Elf (and his magic spear) kills Eldred; Mark kills Elf; Mark towers over Ogier, but Ogier's hatred helps him kill Mark; Alfred and Colan are separated, and Colan dies

Book 7: Ethandune: The Last Charge: a patient child repeats his game, and Alfred learns persistence; Alfred tells Wessex commoners to use their unique talents to fight; Alfred kills Ogier after Mary appears; Colan's men return; Guthrum surrenders and is baptized

Book 8: The Scouring of the Horse: peace in Wessex; Alfred's just laws ("dooms"); some people want Alfred to expand the kingdom; Alfred says that it's hard enough to govern the small things; bad news of the Danes in East Anglia (London); Alfred's parable of scouring the White Horse to avoid future blemishes or even the loss of the culture; warning of the creeping threat from within (books, learning, philosophy); Alfred goes to London and is victorious

Extra notes:

3.116 (p. 38): "the thief of the world"

Book 4 (p. 48): "faith alone" condemned by the editors

4.26 (p. 50): Battle of Ashdown mentioned (see also 8.81, p. 108)

8.324 (p. 117): St. Edmund (martyr)

Debbie Zapata says

The GR blurb for this book prepared me for both *the last great epic poem in the English language* and *a timeless allegory about the ongoing battle between Christianity and the forces of nihilistic heathenism*.

I admit I was not too thrilled to read that last bit. Since I have my own opinions about organized religion and the way it has affected the people of the world, I was not sure I really wanted to read something that would try to say that Christianity is The Only Answer.

But I could not pass this up: King Alfred The Great! The White Horse of Westbury! The Battle at Ethandune! I have only recently learned a bit about King Alfred, and I wanted to learn more, so in I jumped.

Chesterton states in his preface that: *This ballad needs no historical notes, for the simple reason that it does not profess to be historical. All of it that is not frankly fictitious, as in any prose romance about the past, is meant to emphasize tradition rather than history. King Alfred is not a legend in the sense that King Arthur may be a legend; that is, in the sense that he may possibly be a lie. But King Alfred is a legend in this broader and more human sense, that the legends are the most important things about him.*

Chesterton took what was known as fact, added three beloved legends, tossed in the symbolism which creates the allegory, stirred in a healthy dose of his amazing skill with language, and the result is a prose poem full of excitement, deep thinking, humor, and wonderful images. Surprisingly easy to read, with character portrayals that make each man come to vivid life, The Ballad Of The White Horse is a poem I plan to enjoy again in the future.

Sarah says

It was very beautiful. My only criticism is the frequent mention of pagan gods. I know the Danes were pagan, but Chesterton describes one of the Christian characters have gods in his heart or something...it was just confusing for me.

Overall, it was a stunning story of a king trying to save his country from brutal conquerors-complete with bloodshed, visions, and apparitions.

Mark Adderley says

This is the story of King Alfred the Great's victory over the Danish invaders. The verse is beautiful, and hard to catch--it keeps slipping away. Particularly beautiful is the scene in which Alfred, mistaken by the Danes for a bard, defends the Christian view of the world against the pagan.

Jake McAtee says

Fantastic.

"The men of the the East may spell the stars,
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed of the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark.

The men of the East may search the scrolls
For sure fates and fame,
But men that drink the blood of God
Go singing to their shame"

Volsung says

An excellent, poignant work of verse and thought. The story is of Alfred the Great's wanderings in the darkest days of the Viking invasion of England (all the "classic" tales of Alfred from this time are represented, i.e. the woman and the cakes, the harping while disguised in the Viking camp), his mustering of his men, and the final assault and victory of the English over the Northmen. It is an extremely meaningful work, with much contemporary applicability and expression of thought -- it is not allegory as such, but the story and situation represents themes and thoughts important to Chesterton in his (and our) own day. These ideas chiefly concern the difference in belief and actions of Christianity as opposed to paganism ("paganism" not meaning "belief in non-Christian deities," but rather having the Chestertonian sense of something secular, worldly, utterly opposed to the hopes and values of Christianity).

Some excerpts might serve to demonstrate some of these themes, as well as the metre:

From the speech of the Virgin Mary, in King Alfred's vision:

"The men of the East may spell the stars,
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed of the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark.

"The men of the East may search the scrolls
For sure fates and fame,
But the men that drink the blood of God
Go singing to their shame.

...

"But you and all the kind of Christ
Are ignorant and brave,
And you have wars you hardly win
And souls you hardly save.

"I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.

"Night shall be thrice night over you,

And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope?"
(from Book I, "The Vision of the King")

From the description of the memorable Celt, Colan of the Sacred Tree:

"His harp was carved and cunning,
His sword prompt and sharp,
And he was gay when he held the sword,
Sad when he held the harp.

For the great Gaels of Ireland
Are the men that God made mad,
For all their wars are merry,
And all their songs are sad."
(Book II, "The Gathering of the Chiefs")

A description of Guthrum, the Viking war-leader:

"King Guthrum was a dread king,
Like death out of the north;
Shrines without name or number
He rent and rolled as lumber,
From Chester to the Humber
He drove his foemen forth."
(Book V, "Ethandune: The First Stroke")

From the aged King Alfred's personal reflections, near the end of the poem:

"When all philosophies shall fail,
This word alone shall fit;
That a sage feels too small for life,
And a fool too large for it.

"Asia and all imperial plains
Are too little for a fool;
But for one man whose eyes can see,
The little island of Athelney
Is too large a land to rule."
(Book VIII, "The Scouring of the Horse")

Michael says

Once upon a time there was a king who ruled a small country. He was a good king who loved his people, his country, and God. But he was beset with enemies on every side. He fought and lost many battles against

these enemies and was on the brink of absolute defeat. Then one day, as he walked through the woods, a vision appeared to him of a beautiful woman. She encouraged him to take heart and go into battle once more. She did not promise him victory, but her appearance filled him with hope, and he knew he must obey. Gathering his remaining friends around him, they engaged in one last, desperate battle. The king and his friends rose up and killed many of the enemy, but each of his friends fell, until he alone was left to lead the army. In his wrath, he took up his sword against the foe with such fury that they fell away before him, and the enemy king surrendered and became his prisoner. The good king brought peace to his kingdom, his people flourished, and they called him Great for the mighty deliverance he worked for them, and for the prosperity they enjoyed under his reign.

It sounds like a fairy tale, but it is the story of Alfred the Great, king of Wessex and the Anglo-Saxons in the ninth century. “The Ballad of the White Horse” is G.K. Chesterton’s magnificent epic poem based on King Alfred’s climactic victory over the Danish Vikings at the battle of Ethendun. Stirring and bold, it is one of Chesterton’s best works, showing him to be a master of verse as well as prose. It functions not only as the story of Alfred’s victory over the heathen Danes, but also as an allegory of the ongoing war between Christianity and paganism. Chesterton writes of the Danes with their Norse gods:

Their souls were drifting as the sea,
And all good towns and lands,
They only saw with heavy eyes,
And broke with heavy hands.

Their gods were sadder than the sea,
Gods of a wandering will,
Who cried for blood like beasts at night,
Sadly, from hill to hill

The Danes are the pagans of old with gods of death who, even in victory, give no hope or help:

They seemed as trees walking the earth,
As witless and as tall,
Yet they took hold upon the heavens
And no help came at all.

The White Horse of the title is the ancient White Horse of Uffington, a giant horse cut into the chalk of the hillside sometime during the bronze age. Chesterton sets Alfred’s battle in the White Horse vale, for the horse represents both England and the Church. At the beginning of the poem, the horse is grey, overgrown with weeds that threaten to cover and obscure it forever. It is his job to cleanse it, to expel the Danes from England, the pagans from the Church. He is to fight for the purity of both, whether he succeeds or not. Of course, that leaves the Saxons as representative of Christianity, perpetually fighting a terrifying enemy, always seeming on the brink of defeat, but always surviving to glorify God.

“The Ballad of the White Horse” is not just excellent literature. It is Chesterton’s call to the Church; an alarm and a rallying cry. The Church is to be ever on the watch for the invasion of paganism, ever ready to take up arms against its influence to keep it from corrupting and obscuring the beauty and glory it reflects as an image of God. He makes this abundantly clear in a striking passage where Chesterton describes the paganism of his own time directly. Alfred, near the end of his life, prophesies about the enemies that the Church will face in years to come:

They shall not come in war-ships,
They shall not waste with brands,
But books be all their eating,
And ink be on their hands.

Not with the humour of hunters,
Or savage skill in war,
But ordering all things with dead words,
Strings shall they make of beasts and birds,
And wheels of wind and star.

They shall come mild as a monkish clerk,
With many a scroll and pen,
And backward shall ye wonder and gaze,
Desiring one of Alfred's days,
When pagans still were men.

These are the pagans that Chesterton fought, and that the Church still faces today. There is a distinct note of longing here. Chesterton is nostalgic for a past when one could meet the enemy openly, clearly in pitched battle. That same nostalgia resonates deeply with me. If it were only as simple as taking up a sword against a flesh and blood enemy, and not having to sift through twisted words and tortured reasoning to reach to the heart of the enemy. There is no guarantee of victory in either case, but on a physical battlefield, you know who the enemy is.

Filled with Chesterton's trademark wit and wordplay, "The Ballad of the White Horse" is a thrilling read that tells the story of the ancient battle between God's people and their enemy in the heroic rhythms to which a man's heart beats. It is the type of poem that all boys should grow up reading until they are men as an example of what true manhood looks like. As men, they should keep reading it as a reminder that they have a responsibility to scour the horse, to keep it white and pure, to engage their enemy until they hear the words "well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

Richard R., Martin says

Good ballad but sometimes hard to follow because, not knowing the history, I could not follow who was on which side of the conflict.

booklady says

Listened to the poem and followed along with the text. I'm not much for epic poetry as a rule. Hearing it read aloud this way, I can imagine the thrill it used to give ancient peoples when oral recitation was the sole entertainment of the tribe.
