

The Life and Times of Christopher Dawson

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This essay is about how one man experienced the period of history in which he lived, from 1889 to 1970, a period of history that was full of dramatic changes.¹ It is also about his life, his personality, his family, and his friends. This man was Christopher Dawson, a historian of culture, a philosopher of history, and a deeply religious man whose religion very much colored his writing and research but whose aim was to reach an audience as wide as possible and to stimulate his readers to deeper thought about history and life. As he once said to the artist David Jones, “It’s the kind of people who read the *Daily Mirror* I would like to be read by!” This was a telling comment as the *Daily Mirror* was the most popular working-class paper of the day.

In preparation for this essay, I wanted to speak to people who still remembered my grandfather, so I conducted interviews with my father, who was his son-in-law, and with Rosemary Middleton, the daughter of Frank Sheed, Dawson’s publisher. I also drew upon my own scant memories and those of my brothers and have relied heavily on the biography of Dawson written by my mother, Christina Scott, as well as several lectures she gave about him. In addition, I have in my possession some family documents that have yielded a certain amount of historical material about his family and a few unpublished letters. Magdalen Goffin, one of the daughters of Dawson’s great friend, E. I. Watkin, has written a detailed and very interesting biography of her father (*The Watkin Path*), which proved very useful, and there is also a helpful biography of Dawson by Bradley J. Birzer.²

Dawson had a very interesting family background. His mother, who was Welsh, was a keen amateur historian. She researched the lives of many Welsh saints and wrote a history of the Dawson family into which she had married. She was the daughter of Archdeacon Bevan, a scholarly Victorian clergyman with a powerful personality whose parish came with an old castle where the family lived, but a very small salary. This was in the town of Hay-on-Wye, in the Welsh borders, now a mecca for book buyers and sellers from around the world. The family is mentioned in *Kilvert's Diary*, the diary of a minor Victorian clergyman, whom one of the Bevan sisters referred to as "a rather silly man." Kilvert spent much of his time at Hay and loved the company of Dawson's mother and her sisters.

Dawson was born in this castle, which was later partly destroyed in a fire, and was brought up surrounded by history and no doubt regaled with historical tales by his mother. The family were staunch members of the Anglican Church and hostile to Catholicism, a fact that would prove difficult for Dawson when he later converted.

Dawson's father, Colonel Henry Philip Dawson, was an English army officer but also of a scholarly bent. Much to his own disappointment he had never taken part in any military action and retired from the army early, when he inherited his father's estates in Yorkshire and decided to go and live there with his wife and young family. While in the army, he had taken part in a number of scientific expeditions, one in South America (Peru and Bolivia) and another in Canada, where he commanded a circumpolar expedition to Fort Rae. He wrote a number of letters to his mother from these expeditions, which were later typed up in the form of a notebook.³ It contains beautiful descriptions of the Canadian landscape and its rivers teeming with fish.

The Dawson family contained many strands. Beginning as minor landowners in Yorkshire, they became rich through marriage and trade, and in the eighteenth century frequented the Court of George III and gave society balls in London. One ancestor was a Huguenot who became chaplain to George II and then George III; another was a general who fought in the Peninsula wars.

So Dawson had a personal involvement in history from an early age. Obviously, there was also a temperamental inclination, a talent for writing, and perhaps the intervention of fate. His sister, Gwendoline, was also interested in history but never became a historian. Instead she became an Anglican missionary in Africa, where, we were always told as children, she caught malaria and began to “rave in Swahili” after a witch-doctor had left a sacrificed chicken outside her hut. By all accounts, Gwendoline was a very nice person, outgoing, fun, and always thinking of others. She shocked her family by voting Labour and giving a speech to workers at a margarine factory urging them to go on strike. Her only fault seems to have been that she was a terrifying driver.

Many years later, in 1949, Dawson wrote a memoir entitled *Tradition and Inheritance: Memories of a Victorian Childhood* to capture the spirit of a lost world and to highlight the influence of his early childhood impressions and family background on his life's work.⁴ In it he says, “The world of my childhood is already as far away from the contemporary world as it was from the world of the middle ages.”

Dawson's idyllic childhood in the Yorkshire Dales was cut short when he was sent away to boarding school at the age of ten, as boys commonly were in those days. He went first to a preparatory school in the Midlands, called Bilton Grange, which he absolutely hated. There he was frequently ill, not only due to his unhappiness but also, according to his own theory, because he had no immunity to the many germs circulating among the boys, as he had previously led such a healthy life in the Yorkshire countryside.

Pictures of him as a toddler make him look remarkably robust, and yet we know that ill health was a constant feature of his life. He suffered from chronic insomnia, periodic depression, and a range of other ailments. It seems that it all began at this school, where he not only caught all the normal childhood illnesses but also developed chronic bronchitis.

In 1903, he moved on to the next stage of his education, at Winchester College, a public school (in England, this actually means a private school for boys aged thirteen to eighteen)

renowned for its high intellectual standards, whose motto is "Manners maketh man." This aspect of his education does seem to have rubbed off on him, because everyone who knew him always described him as a very courteous person. My father recalls him in this respect: "When I first met him, I was going through an agnostic stage, and I remember having a discussion over the tea table and me more or less saying, 'Well, I think all religions have something to be said for them and are more or less equal, don't you?' He said, 'Not entirely.' He was very tactful and rather nice."

Although school life was not congenial to Dawson, he definitely preferred Winchester to his prep school because the atmosphere was more intellectual, the curriculum was wider, and he had much more freedom. However, after a year, due to the austere life (cold baths and so on) and the damp climate, he had an acute attack of bronchitis and his parents decided to take him away, afraid that he might die. They sent him to a small private tutorial establishment called Bletsoe Rectory that was much more to his liking. In fact, it was a great relief to him and he describes it as the happiest and most carefree period of his life.

There he met Edward Watkin, who would become his lifelong friend, although their first encounter was far from promising. At the time, Dawson was an agnostic and Watkin a devoted Anglo-Catholic. They got into a religious argument that resulted in Watkin bringing the back of a garden chair down upon Dawson's head.⁵

After completing his secondary education, he went up to Oxford to study history at Trinity College. Surprisingly, Dawson did not particularly enjoy his time at Oxford, partly because of his intense shyness and feelings of inferiority to the other young men, all of whom seemed to belong to some clique or another. Watkin, with whom he shared rooms at one point, remembered him once hiding under the table when some visitors came.

His tutor, Ernest Barker, whose field was Greek political theory, was a strongly individualistic character with a booming voice and a strong Manchester accent with whom Dawson got on remarkably well. Barker later said of him that he had "the mind and

the equipment of a philosophical historian above any contemporary or pupil" he had ever known.⁶ (According to my brother Dominic, Ernest Barker once proposed to Dawson's sister Gwendoline, but for whatever reason she turned him down.) However, Dawson was not interested in following the syllabus and preferred to study what attracted him personally, and in this Professor Barker encouraged him, being himself "a man of many-sided interests," in Dawson's words.⁷ As a result he gained only a second-class degree, while his friend Watkin was awarded a first-class degree, with the highest mark in his college.

They both received their results by telegram while Watkin was on a visit to Dawson and his family at Hartlington in Yorkshire. An account of this survives in a journal kept by Watkin, which has been published with an introduction and notes by Joseph T. Stuart.⁸ It gives a remarkable picture of the times; another world that, for some people at least, was idyllic. Watkin was picked up from the station by Dawson in a horse-drawn carriage. He went on walks with Dawson, his sister and some friends, and frequently went bathing in the local rivers.

Watkin loved to strip and bathe in rivers or lie in the grass. It fits in with the picture of him as a very natural and eccentric person, which emerges from his daughter Magdalen's biography and from my interviews with those who knew him. My father tells the following story about him:

E. I. Watkin couldn't have been less like your grandfather in one way, because he was much more outgoing. In fact he could be great fun and could take a joke against himself. One evening, your mother and I were having drinks at Fordcombe with his daughter Magdalen and her husband, Richard Goffin. E. I., then elderly and pretty stout, was staying with them and sitting more or less naked from the waist up sprawled in front of the log fire. Suddenly, Richard got up, went to the front door, opened it and shouted "Come in Vicar!" This was a trick he had apparently played before, but it worked once again. E. I. leapt to his feet,

preparatory to rushing upstairs to put on more respectable clothes.

Rosemary Middleton, the daughter of Dawson's publisher, told me of her memories of Watkin:

He was extremely eccentric and his whole demeanor and gait drew attention to him as a strange person. There was the time before one of his daughter's weddings, when my father looked at him nervously and said something like "Are you going to be wearing a morning suit?" and he said "But it would make me look so ... conspicuous!"—as if anything could be more conspicuous than how he always looked.

Rosemary continues:

He was a darling; he was so extraordinary. I can remember traveling on a bus with him from Sheed & Ward's office to the Café Royal where we were meeting my father for lunch and he was sitting two seats away from me because it was a crowded bus and he was talking in his extraordinary way which was very difficult to understand because it was so fast, all of it; and he had a sort of knitting bag in which he had all his books or whatever he was travelling with and he just was so eccentric!

What is also fascinating about Watkin's diary of his visit to Hartlington is that he keeps a detailed record of everything he read, which reveals the almost constant reading that occupied both him and Dawson. The following excerpt is typical:

We read some most amusing back numbers of *Punch*. Of *The Broad Stone of Honour* (volume 2) I read from page 62 to circa 175. We had tea out on the terrace. In the evening I read chapters 15 and 16 of St. John's Gospel (G & L)

and continued Tancredus. I also read chapter 10 of part 9 (volume 5) of *Modern Painters*, "The Nereid's Guard." After dinner I looked through Borlasc's "Age of the Saints," a most interesting book on the saints and Christian archaeology in Cornwall. Before bed I read canto 15 of Dante's *Inferno*.

If the diary is anything to go on, Watkin seemed to be more interested in the books he was reading than the people he met, of whom he says little or nothing.

At night they would go out onto the terrace to look at the stars with Dawson's father, who was interested in astronomy. He also seems to have been something of an astrologer, because Watkin tells of a prediction he made about a forthcoming war between Germany, Britain, France, and Russia, followed by pestilence, based on a conjunction of the planets Mars and Saturn in Aries. This was in the summer of 1911.

It was while he was at Oxford that Dawson met his future wife, Valery. The story of their meeting is very romantic, as recounted in my mother's biography of Dawson. Dawson was invited to a party at Oxford, where he saw a photograph of Valery dressed as Joan of Arc. Seeing him so enraptured, his host offered to introduce him to her at a later date. When he met her, he found that "she was more beautiful in real life than in the photograph, and fell immediately and hopelessly in love with her."⁹

She and Dawson were very different personalities, although they shared an interest in antiquities, a love of beauty, and a dislike of urban life. Valery's mother, Mrs. Mills, was against the match, on the grounds of Dawson's ill health. Indeed, in the year of their marriage, Dawson was writing to Valery from a nursing home while she was looking for somewhere for them both to live. So it does raise the question of why Valery agreed to marry him. She had several other admirers but was fascinated by the shy but handsome young man whom she referred to as a walking encyclopedia. In those days she thought only of dances, parties, and flirtations, but it seems that an audience with Pope Pius X influenced her to

reform her life. It was not what he said to her but the way he looked into her eyes. Valery's mother recalled:

When the Holy Father entered the room we felt to be in the presence of a saint, his expression was wonderful, never to be forgotten. He looked earnestly at each one when he gave his hand to be kissed and his eyes seemed to search one's heart; he looked twice at Valery, the second time when he stood at the end of the room and gave his blessing to all of us and to our families.

Dawson proposed to Valery when she returned to Oxford in 1913, and she had no hesitation in accepting despite all the objections on both sides of the family. But the business of proposing was no easy matter for the shy Dawson. According to Valery's own account, as told to my mother, "He was completely tongue-tied when he came to propose—he came back the next day and failed again and it was only on the third visit he succeeded in getting out his words because he knew he would not be seeing her again for some time."

Thereafter, Valery played a pivotal role in Dawson's life because, apart from anything else, she looked after all those mundane aspects that he found rather difficult, such as paying bills and visiting schools, protecting him from all unpleasantness and interruptions, inviting friends around and so on. Sometimes she could go a bit too far in her eagerness to make everything run smoothly for her husband. My father told me a story that illustrates this:

After the war, in Budleigh Salterton, they had a friend called Ralph Ricketts. Ralph was a writer as well, and one day I met him outside the London Library and he was literally still shaking with rage because Valery had rung him up and said, 'Oh, you must come round, Christopher's not very well, Christopher needs some company,' and there was Ralph trying to write his *own* book.

Many years later, toward the end of Dawson's period in America, Valery was awarded an honorary doctorate from Regis College in Weston, Massachusetts, and I think she probably well deserved it in light of all the sacrifices she made for Dawson's work.

Valery was born a Catholic and no doubt Dawson's love for her was a factor in his conversion, as he converted shortly after their engagement. However, from the beginning of his time at Oxford he had begun to come into contact with Catholic influences through Watkin, who had already converted. He was also steeping himself in Augustine's *City of God* and the works of several other Catholic authors. In 1909 (before meeting Valery), Dawson visited Rome with Watkin and had a vision of his life's work on the steps of the Capitol, which is recounted in my mother's biography.¹⁰ Sitting in the same place where Edward Gibbon had been inspired to write *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he felt guided by God to write a history of culture. But at this point he was still a long way from converting.

Conversion was no light decision, especially in those days, when the ties of religion and family were very strong. Dawson's mother never reconciled herself to his change of allegiance, and his Welsh relations cut him off completely. Only his father showed some sympathy because he was Anglo-Catholic. Perhaps this experience of social ostracism gave him a personal interest in the writing of his book *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement*, whose protagonist, Newman, went through the same process but on a much more public stage.

Shortly after his time at Oxford the First World War broke out. Neither Dawson nor Watkin was called up, as Dawson was exempt on health grounds and Watkin, being a pacifist, was a conscientious objector. It is interesting to hear Dawson's views of the First World War, as expressed in his work *Religion and the Modern State*:

As a direct result of the War the European social organism lost its political stability and its economic equilibrium, while at the same time the forces of disintegration were

immeasurably strengthened. ... Nor is this all, for the spiritual results of the War were no less serious than the economic. It dealt a mortal blow to the idealism and optimism and humanitarianism of European liberalism and aroused instincts of violence which had hitherto been dormant. In a word it changed the spiritual atmosphere of Europe.¹¹

From around 1914 onward, Dawson embarked on a period of intense private study, during which time he published very little.¹² He had a small allowance from his father that enabled him to survive and a meager income from the publication of articles, particularly in a periodical called *The Sociological Review*, to which he was a regular contributor.

In 1919 Dawson and Valery's first child, Juliana, was born, later to be followed by Christina, my mother, and then Philip. They lived in many places, as if Dawson found it very difficult to settle anywhere. My mother said she always remembered that biblical phrase "Here we have no abiding city," which she found very apt. In 1924 Dawson took up a part-time lectureship in the history of culture at Exeter University, so they moved to Dawlish on the Devonshire coast. There they had a house large enough for themselves and the enormous library that Dawson had inherited from his uncle as well as his own books. I spoke to my aunt Juliana shortly before she died in December 2009 and asked her what she remembered of her father. She was not in possession of all her faculties by that time and her reply was simply this: "He had a very large library."

I am sometimes asked by admirers of my grandfather's work whether I knew him well and whether he was a great family man. As to the first question, I was born in the year he went to the United States (1958), and when he returned, some five years later, it was in a wheelchair having suffered a series of strokes. I only remember meeting him on the grounds of a nursing home and that he had considerable difficulty in speaking. My other brothers have similarly sketchy recollections, although my youngest brother,

Dominic, who went to school at Sidmouth, near where they lived, remembers holding up one of his books to him as a child and Dawson, who by that time could hardly speak, managing to say: “I wrote that.”

As to the second question—whether he was a great family man—the answer seems to be fairly conclusively no. He was interested in the family from a historical and sociological point of view and considered it as central to the welfare of society, but his own family came second to his work: “Everything in that family revolved around Christopher,” my father told me. “He was the one on whom all attention must be focused.”

My mother says in her biography that he was approachable as a father but that as the children grew up an increasing distance seemed to come between them. From my father’s accounts, and those of others I have spoken to, Dawson and Valery were very unappreciative of my mother. According to my father, it seemed to give them no great pleasure, as it would to most parents, that they had a clever daughter who went to Oxford, and he cites several instances in which they treated her rather badly.

Nor were they very happy, surprisingly, when their eldest daughter Juliana became a nun. My father comments: “You might have thought they would have been pleased to have a daughter become a nun, but not at all. They would have preferred her to continue to live at home with them, or to have got married. Valery in particular was distraught about it.”

As for their son, Philip, it seems that Valery rather spoiled him, while Dawson despaired of his inability to stick to anything. Dominic recalls the following from his childhood memories:

My most amusing encounter was when Philip was also there for lunch with Valery, and just me. She had promised to buy him some sort of trolley or “hostess” and they were going through the catalogue. He was being very choosy, so I blurted out that she was spoiling him. I’m not sure how well that went down, but they pretended to find it funny. In retrospect, maybe it was a bit close to the bone.

All in all, my impression is that Dawson and Valery were not the best of parents. I suppose that in the light of Dawson's general character, this was perhaps to be expected. He was temperamentally very reserved, suffered from frequent ill health, and was constantly worrying about how his books were being received as well as the state of the world. In addition, he lived very much in his mind, as many people have testified.

Maisie Ward recounts in her autobiography an incident in which her husband, Frank Sheed, went to visit Dawson.¹³ Upon opening the door, and without any form of preliminary greeting, Dawson said: "What remarkable similarities there are between the religion of the Hairy Ainu and the Northern Siberian Nomads—although ethnologically they are quite distinct."

However, if he felt that someone was interested in his ideas, and as long as that person was not a rival, he could be extremely friendly and communicative. Sheed's daughter, Rosemary, told me the following anecdote:

A friend of mine, an American who had got a scholarship to go and do a PhD at Louvain, went to see him because the research she was doing was very much in his line and she'd read all his books; and she had a wonderful time. I mean, he just was so helpful to her because she was interested in what he was interested in and she wanted to hear what he had to say.

I think that his students in the United States probably had the same experience, but as Rosemary pointed out, you had to be talking about something that interested him.

In my mother's biography there is a very interesting portrait in words of Dawson by Ralph Ricketts, who lived near the Dawsons when they were in Budleigh Salterton. It is too long to reproduce in full here, but the following are a few extracts:

I first met Christopher Dawson in 1954 or 1955 when he must have been about sixty-five. ... I recall a mixture of

venerability and youthfulness; his courtesy ... the unusual combination of fragility and virility. ... I have heard it said that Christopher was difficult to talk to; certainly he had little interest in small talk. ... I found him stimulating. ... His large brown eyes were almost feminine in their liquid expressiveness, revealing his thought and feeling; they would glint with an almost mischievous amusement, grow bright with interest or opaque with apathy or disapproval. ... He was essentially well bred in every sense of the word. ... He was never malicious. Beneath his sensibility he gave an impression of balance, even of stoicism; but he could be touchy. To some extent, you had to bend to his mood and wishes: if he was tired or bored, he made little effort to disguise it; in fact, he made little social effort of any kind. He was completely natural, like a child.¹⁴

My father completes this picture with his own impressions of his then future father-in-law:

He was diffident and had no sort of general conversation. I was quite good at drawing him out, partly because I was interested in the matters he wrote about and partly because I wasn't his intellectual equal. He was quite touchy when it came to his equals and rivals.

I was studying history at Cambridge at the time and the only book of his I had read was *The Making of Europe*, which helped to make his name and was on the reading list at Cambridge when I was up. If you were studying that period of history you probably read that book. There was another academic of the time called Moss, who was, as I heard, a most genial, sociable man. *The Making of Europe* is a study of the Dark Ages and simultaneously with his book came one by Moss, which was much more a straight political history of the time. They were both quite different, and the don who was at one point my supervisor told me that on one occasion he had invited both your

grandfather and Moss to have tea with him, and the fact was that Moss was an absolutely wonderful guest, while your grandfather hardly uttered a word, or if he did his replies were monosyllabic. So the whole tea party was a great failure.

Ward sums up these two sides of Dawson's character in her autobiography:

From Chinese dynasties to American Indians, from prehistory to the Oxford Movement, from Virgil to the latest novel or even "Western," Christopher can talk of anything, although you can also find him plunged in an almost unbreakable silence and impervious to the people and things around him.¹⁵

In 1928, at the age of forty, his first book (*The Age of the Gods*) was published by the firm John Murray and did quite well for an academic book of this type. Soon after, however, he was persuaded to move to a new publisher, Sheed & Ward, which specialized in Catholic books and aimed to reach a wider public. His first book with them was *Progress and Religion* (1929), which summed up what is perhaps the dominating thesis of all his work:

The great civilizations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of cultural by-product; in a very real sense, the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest. A society which has lost its religion becomes sooner or later a society which has lost its culture.¹⁶

Sheed & Ward was a firm formed by an Australian lawyer, Frank Sheed, and his wife, Maisie, whose maiden name was Ward and who came from an old family of highly intellectual, and one might say "ethereal," Catholics. Their daughter Rosemary told me that Sheed, aware of the difference in their backgrounds,

used to tell his wife jokingly: "I have come to bring some vulgarity into your life."

To call him a lawyer, however, is perhaps deceptive. Although he had trained as a barrister in Australia, he chose not to practice. Instead, he put his dialectical skills to a different use in London by regularly speaking on a soapbox at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park for an organization called the Catholic Evidence Guild.

My mother remembers Sheed fondly, describing him as "blunt, outgoing and with great apostolic zeal." In a lecture for The Keys Society (a society for Catholic writers and journalists founded by G. K. Chesterton), she recalls:

I remember [Sheed] as one of the great figures of my childhood, visiting us in all the lonely outposts we lived. He once came down to Dawlish where we lived in Devon by the milk-train, had a few hours' sleep on the cliffs by the sea and turned up in time for breakfast. For us children he had great entertainment value for he used to sit at the piano singing "Waltzing Matilda" and bouncing up and down to the music.

Once he and Maisie came to see us in Yorkshire in an amazing car with a dickey seat (an extra folding seat at the back of the vehicle). On the way home it blew up, so he drove it into a farmyard and abandoned it—meanwhile Maisie was scrabbling in the dickey seat trying to rescue the manuscript of her book on Wilfrid Ward, her father.

Sheed's daughter, Rosemary, said of him:

He was a wonderful man, for all those who met him. When he died, many people contacted me to say what a wonderful person he was and how much they would miss him. He was very funny and very good with people. Once when he was very old, he was staying with me and I took him up an early morning cup of tea in bed. I said "You look very cozy there," and he replied, "Like a rose embower'd, my dear, in

its own green leaves.” [English majors among you will recognize this as a quotation from Shelley’s “Ode to a Skylark.”]

Dawson’s next major works for Sheed & Ward were *The Making of Europe*, which is perhaps the best known of all his books, *Medieval Religion*, based on a series of lectures he gave at Liverpool, and *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement*, published in 1933, which Dawson himself regarded as his best work.

From 1933 onward, Dawson began to write a number of political works, impelled to do so by the darkening political situation before and during the Second World War. These included *Religion and the Modern State*, *Beyond Politics*, and several essays subsequently published as books: *The Modern Dilemma*, *Christianity and the New Age*, and *The Judgment of the Nations*. In the last of these, he writes of his own view of the Second World War:

We are passing through one of the great turning points of history. ... We see all the resources of science and technology of which we were so proud devoted methodically to the destruction of the world. And behind this material destruction there are even greater evils, the loss of freedom and the loss of hope, the enslavement of whole people to an inhuman order of violence and oppression. Yet however dark the prospect appears we know that the ultimate decision does not rest with man but with God and that it is not his will to leave humanity to its own destructive impulse or to the slavery of the powers of evil.¹⁷

This was also a time of great change in his own circumstances. In 1933, his father died and he inherited his house and estate in Yorkshire. At the same time the chair of philosophy and the history of religion at Leeds University fell vacant, and he was invited to apply for the post. So he decided to move up to his father’s old home, Hartlington Hall, and applied for this job, for which he seemed perfectly suited. He had recommendations from the

distinguished historian H. A. L. Fisher, the vice-chancellor of Manchester University and the principal of University College Exeter, among others. Ernest Barker, his tutor at Oxford, extolled him as “a man and a scholar of the same sort of quality as Acton and Von Hügel.” But in the end his application was unsuccessful. The reason was almost certainly his religion, as there were a number of Anglican bishops who were very much against the appointment of a Catholic to such an important position.

This disappointment, coupled with the isolation he experienced in Yorkshire, as well as the cold climate, combined with other factors to bring him to a very low state. My mother said that he suffered from a combination of heart strain, insomnia, and severe depression. When I asked my father what he believed to be the underlying cause of Dawson’s depression, from which he suffered intermittently throughout his life, he replied:

I think it was partly oversensitivity and worrying all the time, about what other people would think of his books and how he wasn’t getting the treatment he ought to have had ... and also a genuine—and justified—worry about what was happening in the world.

He went down to Sidmouth in Devon to recuperate and spent a lot of time there with the artist and poet David Jones, who was also recovering from a nervous breakdown. They used to go for walks together and discuss Welsh literature, Celtic mythology, and the traditions of Greece and Rome. Jones was very appreciative of Dawson, and we can see through their friendship what attracted people to him, even if at times he could be difficult. When he shared intellectual interests with someone he could be a fascinating conversationalist—not only because he knew so much but also because he had a fiery and powerful mind, very different from his physical invalidity. A friend of Jones’s, after meeting Dawson as they walked along the sea front, remarked: “My God, what a tiger!”—in allusion to his fierce intellect. Rosemary Middleton confirmed this: “Both my parents thought of him as someone who

knew about absolutely everything. ... Everyone thought of him as a kind of god in a way because he had this fantastic mind which nobody else had." She reminded me of a passage in Sheed's book *The Church and I* in which the following incident is recounted to illustrate Dawson's immense learning:

I had remarked that Hormisdas was the only Pope whose son became Pope: he seemed surprised, asked was I sure, checked and found that it was so: he asked me how I had happened to know: I said, "You told me." That slip apart, his memory was close to infallible—I imagine because each new thing learned found its place in a mental structure he has spent his whole life building.¹⁸

In 1940, Dawson became editor of the *Dublin Review* and moved to Boar's Hill near Oxford. He and Valery remained there for about thirteen years, the longest they had ever been in any one place.

In the same year he was invited to be vice-president of a wartime movement called the Sword of the Spirit founded by Cardinal Hinsley and intended to unite all men of good will against totalitarianism.

However, both of these enterprises brought him many difficulties. After Cardinal Hinsley's death in 1943 he was ousted from the *Dublin Review* by Douglas Jerrold, who regarded him as insufficiently right wing, while the Sword of the Spirit was brought to a standstill by Dr. Amigo, Bishop of Southwark, who was against any kind of collaboration with non-Catholics. All of this was very depressing for Dawson, who was very ecumenical in outlook and very much against the politicization of religion.

Rosemary Middleton remarked:

In Christina's account of the whole Sword of the Spirit thing, you can see that that would have depressed anybody, because Christopher had been really involved in the whole starting up of it, and it was to be ecumenical, and then this

wretched archbishop said Catholics shouldn't be joining in with other people, because people might think that they agreed with them; they couldn't say the Lord's Prayer together because they meant something different by it; and he stopped it all; and Christopher had really done a lot of work for that; and I think something like that would make you depressed if you were already inclined in that direction.

In spite of these setbacks and strains, Dawson was becoming increasingly well-known and respected. In 1945 he received a letter from Edinburgh University offering him the post of Gifford lecturer for 1946–1947, which he accepted with some trepidation. A year into the term, he was near the point of tendering his resignation because he felt he was not specialized enough but was firmly dissuaded from doing so and duly delivered the lectures, which were subsequently published in two volumes, *Religion and Culture* and *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, and have recently been put online by the Templeton Foundation. Over the next ten years he did a considerable amount of lecturing, broadcasting, and reviewing. His broadcasting included contributions to a series for the BBC entitled *The Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*. Perhaps inspired by this, he then wrote his semiautobiographical work *Tradition and Inheritance: Memories of a Victorian Childhood*, which I mentioned earlier.

In 1953, an American history teacher who much admired Dawson's work, John Mulloy, came to visit Dawson and discussed bringing together a large body of his work in an American publication to be called *The Dynamics of World History*, which helped to broaden his reputation with the American public. In the same year, he and Valery moved to Budleigh Salterton in Devon, and in 1958 he was offered the guest professorship of Roman Catholic studies at Harvard, endowed by the Catholic millionaire Chauncey Stillman.

My father recalled:

The American appointment—a new chair at Harvard—was a great boost to Christopher. He felt that at last he had

received proper acknowledgement. But he demanded to take about 4,000 of his own books with him, thinking that Harvard's resources would not be sufficient, and Harvard meekly agreed to pay for the transport of them.

This offer by Chauncey Stillman, to become the first professor of Roman Catholic studies at Harvard, was both a godsend and a curse in a way, because he loved it there and was terribly excited about going, but unfortunately he was a hopeless speaker. He used to have chaps to more or less read his lectures for him. ... But he had four very nice years there, I think, out of five, and then he had this stroke and collapsed. I remember seeing him on his return, being wheeled down the platform at Liverpool Street Station after coming off the ship, and being shocked at how frail he looked.

Having heard the name Chauncey Stillman a lot when I was a child, I took the opportunity to ask my father what he was like. He replied:

Chauncey was a very nice man, and a dyed-in-the-wool old-style Catholic. The Second Vatican Council started when Chauncey was still very much around and he had very little time for it. One of your grandfather's assistants when he was at Harvard later wanted to be invited to lunch when your mother and your uncle Philip were staying with Chauncey after your grandfather's death, and Chauncey disapproved of him so much that he would not appear at the table and only reappeared when he had gone. So to that extent Chauncey and Christopher Dawson were well matched. ... By the terms of the grant he had made, Chauncey didn't have any say, after Dawson, on who would be elected to the chair, so a whole string of people of Vatican Two or post-Vatican Two persuasion were elected one after the other, who would not have met with his approval.

My grandfather returned from the United States in 1962 and, because of the strokes he had suffered, was unable to write, but with the help of his old friend, Edward Watkin, he managed to get the first two volumes of his Harvard lectures into book form, *The Dividing of Christendom* and *The Formation of Christendom*, both of which were published by Sheed & Ward. He died of a heart attack in 1970, at the age of eighty-one, amazing for someone who had been ill for much of his life, not to mention smoking about sixty cigarettes a day, although, as my mother used to tell us, “he did not inhale.”

I would like to end by quoting my father’s views on the value of Dawson’s work. My father read history at Cambridge and has spent all his working life in the literary world, having been a journalist, publisher, and literary agent. When I asked him what he thought of Dawson’s books from a literary and intellectual point of view, his answer was as follows:

He has lasted, whereas most of those conventional dons of the time are completely forgotten. I was recently trying to read a book by a historian who in my youth I thought was very admirable, E. F. Powicke, and he wrote a book on the fifteenth century in the *Oxford History of England* series. I tried to read it again the other day and I thought it was absolutely unreadable. Although your grandfather’s books *are* readable, you have to pay attention, but if you do they are truly fascinating. He’s talking about something of lasting importance, enlightening you on all sorts of subjects, depending on the book.

Christopher Dawson wrote a sort of philosophical history that depends very much on having a set of ideas about the world or the period you’re writing about and if those ideas continue to stand up people will go on reading about them. And the thing about your grandfather is that he was never dry in a sort of academic, pedantic way at all. That’s why I think he goes on having a good following in different parts of the world where people are actually as

interested in ideas as in mere facts. Also, facts are inclined to be challenged after a time, to be found wanting or inaccurate when new ones are discovered, whereas if you are writing about ideas and movements, that's a subject which is less vulnerable to the ravages of time.

I have found this to be very true in my own readings of my grandfather's works, and I sincerely hope he will continue to stimulate readers in the future and inspire them to think about history from a spiritual perspective.

Julian Scott

Endnotes

1. This lecture was given at the University of St. Thomas in April 2011 under the auspices of the Center for Catholic Studies.
2. Bradley J. Birzer, *Sanctifying the World* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press Books, 2007); Magdalen Goffin, *The Watkin Path* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2006).
3. The notebook remains unpublished, residing in our family archives.
4. *Tradition and Inheritance* was first published in two parts, appearing in *The Wind and the Rain* vol. V, no. 4 (Spring, 1949), 210–218 and *The Wind and the Rain* vol. VI, no. 1 (Summer, 1949), 7–17.
5. Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1984), 37.
6. *Ibid.*, 110.
7. *Ibid.*, 44.
8. Joseph T. Stuart, "Yorkshire Days in Edwardian England: E. I. Watkin's Diary and His Friendship with Christopher Dawson," *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* LXXXIV, no. 1 (2012): 205–223.
9. Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 50–51.
10. *Ibid.*, 49.
11. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Modern State* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1936), 2–3.
12. "The Nature and Destiny of Man" [1920] is from this period. This essay was later published in Christopher Dawson, *Enquiries into Religion and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 2011), 256–286.
13. Maisie Ward, *Unfinished Business* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 117.
14. Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 173–174.

15. Ward, *Unfinished Business*, 117.
16. Quoted in, Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 89.
17. Christopher Dawson, *The Judgment of the Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 149–150.
18. Frank Sheed, *The Church and I* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 123.