

Praise for *Women of the Catholic Imagination*

“This new collection of essays on an exemplary group of Catholic writers, all women, includes many of the most distinguished authors of the early-twentieth-century literary revival and some of our greatest contemporaries. The richest of touchstones, it gives some of our day’s finest writers and scholars the chance to lead us on a journey of rediscovery. Readers will find terrific introductions to established greats such as Undset, Spark, and Godden as well as some of the first explorations of the theological depths of contemporaries such as Morrison, McDermott, and Tarrt. What a perfectly imagined, timely, and exciting book.”

—**James Matthew Wilson**, author of *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds*

“When *Women of the Catholic Imagination: Twelve Inspired Novelists You Should Know* arrived in my inbox, I was pleasantly surprised to find that all twelve of the women writers featured are future considerations for Well-Read Mom selections. This treasured resource will acquaint readers with literary gems that are waiting to be discovered once again.”

—**Marcie Stokman**, president and founder of Well-Read Mom

“A terrific volume that demonstrates the way Catholicism has informed and in turn been enriched by the imaginative works of a number of female authors, most of whom have been unduly neglected. Correcting that injustice, these elegantly written essays invite readers to explore texts that deepen our appreciation of the great mysteries of human life: good and evil, despair and hope, tragedy and redemption.”

—**Thomas Hibbs**, J. Newton Rayzor Sr. Professor of Philosophy and Dean Emeritus, Baylor University

“Each essay in this book beams a light on a Catholic luminary who may have been overshadowed by her male contemporaries. Now, thanks to this book, the brilliant women of the Catholic imagination shine forth. Reading this collection not only introduces you to more friends in the Church but also extends your reading list!”

—**Jessica Hooten Wilson**, author of *Flannery O’Connor’s “Why Do the Heathen Rage?” A Behind-the-Scenes Look at a Work in Progress*

“This exciting collection of essays on the life and work of Catholic female literary figures calls out not only to Roman Catholic readers but to those who are interested in the way that literature can evoke those truths we find it difficult to speak about without the help of story, and the legacy of women throughout history who have done just that.”

—**Joy Clarkson**, author of *Aggressively Happy* and *You Are a Tree*

WOMEN
of the CATHOLIC
IMAGINATION

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IMAGINATION

TWELVE INSPIRED NOVELISTS
YOU SHOULD KNOW

EDITED BY *Haley Stewart*

WORD  on FIRE[®]

Published by Word on Fire,
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007
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Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction
by Rozann Lee, Clare Sheaf, and Cassie Bielak

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Ministries, PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330
or email contact@wordonfire.org.

ISBN: 978-1-68578-096-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023952249

Contents

Introduction: A Good Novel Can Change Your Life <i>Haley Stewart</i>	1
Josephine Ward: Transforming a Heritage of Exile <i>Eleanor Bourq Nicholson</i>	8
Sigrid Undset: Novelist of Mercy <i>Amy Fahey</i>	22
Caryll Houselander: Divine Eccentric <i>Julia Meszaros</i>	38
Gertrud von le Fort: Undaunted Ambassador of Grace <i>Helena M. Tomko</i>	54
Flannery O'Connor: Incarnational Fiction <i>Angela Alaimo O'Donnell</i>	68
Caroline Gordon: Lost and Found <i>Joshua Hren</i>	85
Rumer Godden: Listening with the Inner Ear <i>Katy Carl</i>	99
Alice Thomas Ellis: Bohemian Traditionalist <i>Bonnie Lander Johnson</i>	113
Muriel Spark: Transformative Satire <i>Dorian Speed</i>	126

Toni Morrison: Writer of the Crucifix <i>Nick Ripatrazone</i>	141
Alice McDermott: Radiant Vision in <i>Someone</i> <i>Paul J. Contino</i>	152
Donna Tartt: Catholic Writing in Secular Form <i>Jennifer Frey</i>	164
Conclusion: The Hidden Secret of Christian Literature <i>Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera</i>	177

INTRODUCTION

A Good Novel Can Change Your Life

Haley Stewart

A good novel can change your life. It has happened to me.

I sat on a blanket in my backyard reading the last fifty pages of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* on a spring evening. It was my senior year at the world's largest Baptist university, and I wept with joy as I encountered the power of the sacraments of the Catholic Church for the first time. It wasn't because the book *explained* the sacraments clearly. In fact, the Catholic characters' understanding of theology in the novel is quite muddled. They cannot effectively explain to Charles, the agnostic protagonist, *why* Last Rites (Anointing of the Sick) would be necessary. But as Charles watches, transfixed, as a lapsed Catholic character makes the sign of the cross on his deathbed, accepting the extraordinary salvific grace of the sacrament offered to him by an ordinary parish priest, I was overcome with longing for that same sacramental grace. Had it been simply explained to me instead of offered in a story, I may never have understood at all. Two years later, my husband and I were receiving the sacraments of Reconciliation, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation at our local Catholic parish.

My husband was pushed across the Tiber not by *Brideshead Revisited* but through the works of American Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor (featured in this collection of essays). Catholic faith "clicked" for him with a steady ingestion of the shocking short stories and disturbing Southern gothic novels by this famous authoress of Milledgeville, Georgia. Years after our conversion, I took something of a literary pilgrimage to Andalusia, the family home of O'Connor. I walked around the house and watched the peacocks, descendants of her beloved flock, wander around their coop. I rocked in a chair on her front porch, awestruck that I was on the same porch where she sat, her mind humming with stories that changed our lives.

Waugh and O'Connor are novelists you might find highlighted in any course on Catholic novels, likely accompanied by G.K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, and Walker Percy. But they're certainly not the only worthwhile Catholic novelists. As I sought out other writers as a new Catholic, I kept discovering more and more gems. I picked up a one-thousand-page book by twentieth-century Norwegian author Sigrid Undset (featured in this collection). As I stepped into the medieval Norway of her masterpiece, the world of the protagonist Kristin Lavransdatter, Undset captivated me. When I learned that she converted to Catholicism soon after writing the three novels that make up the epic *Kristin Lavransdatter*, I was unsurprised. "How could she *not* have become Catholic after writing this?"

Kristin Lavransdatter is saturated with Catholicism—and not because Undset's characters are so very holy. Kristin is less a saint and more of a fourteenth-century Don Draper—driving the reader mad with frustration at her relentless mistakes and selfishness! But it is a Catholic story as *Brideshead Revisited* is Catholic: the Catholic characters are messy, broken, and confused, but the grace and mercy of God surrounds them, haunts them, and in turn haunts us, the readers.

A good Catholic novel can communicate truth about God, about sin, about grace, about sacrament. It can evangelize through one of the most powerful methods: *story*. As human beings, we are wired for story by our Creator. Jesus taught his disciples through parables, knowing his followers could not grasp those lessons as effectively any other way. We see this same phenomenon at other times in Holy Scripture. When the prophet Nathan confronts King David with the reality of his betrayal and murder of Uriah, he does not walk up to the king's throne and begin condemning his sin. Instead, he *tells a story*. He describes a rich man who takes the only beloved lamb of a poor neighbor. With Nathan's help, this powerful story is what reveals David to himself. He comes to understand that he is the evil man, the thief of a cherished lamb: Uriah's wife, Bathsheba.

We understand ourselves through stories. And if we want to evangelize the world, we must tell good stories. Novels speak to our hearts, and their characters journey with us for the rest of our lives. The very best books call us out of our comfort zones to conversion. They point us to what is true and good and beautiful and to their ultimate source: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty itself.

Over the years since my conversion, I've discovered more and more Catholic writers whose books have become friends. And brilliant Catholic women keep showing up to change my life with their novels. In addition to Flannery O'Connor, there is Josephine Ward, Caryll Houselander, Gertrud von le Fort, Caroline Gordon, Rumer Godden, Alice Thomas Ellis, Muriel Spark, Toni Morrison, Alice McDermott, and Donna Tartt—all of whom deserve more readers of their brilliant writing. Recent and still-living novelists included in this volume call into question the idea that the Catholic literary movement fizzled out after the era of Waugh and O'Connor.

In my eagerness to learn more about them, I looked for a volume introducing readers to Catholic women novelists, but I couldn't find one. While there are many titles lauding Catholic

men like J.R.R. Tolkien, Walker Percy, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh (and to be fair, O'Connor is often included in this pantheon of writers), many of the Catholic women have been forgotten over the decades (Caroline Gordon, for instance); or, if they are remembered, their Catholic identity has been largely unexplored (like Toni Morrison and Donna Tartt). I hope this book brings these writers and their Catholic faith into a much-deserved spotlight. They are simply too good not to share.

WHAT MAKES A NOVELIST A *CATHOLIC* NOVELIST?

Much ink has been spilt on what counts as a “Catholic novel.” What makes a book a *Catholic* book? When determining which writers to include in this volume, we began with the most basic consideration: Is the writer a baptized Catholic? This measurement disqualified some wonderful non-Catholic writers like Willa Cather and Susannah Clarke, who offer a powerful sacramental worldview from their Protestant tradition. But there are plenty of Catholic women writers to explore—far too many, in fact, to include in this collection.

Pope Benedict XVI, speaking as Cardinal Ratzinger at the time, claimed, “The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb.”¹

This art that has grown in the womb of the Church includes Catholic novels infused with a sacramental view that evangelizes the reader with beauty. These writers’ imaginations have been formed by the sacred, and the worlds of their stories are permeated with grace—sometimes explicit grace, sometimes hidden grace. Their novels will challenge and convict. In some of their books, Catholicism is front and center. (You simply cannot get away from nuns in Godden’s *In This House of Brede* or McDermott’s

1. Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985), 129.

The Ninth Hour.) Others, like the works of Flannery O'Connor, are largely devoid of Catholic characters and settings. But as Catholic writers, their stories have been formed by their faith. And their breathtaking artistry has influenced the world. Their work is characterized by hope, even when their stories unsettle us with the darkness of violence, suffering, or doubt. The chaos of despair does not prevail. In Flannery O'Connor's words, "The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for."²

And yet, while I know firsthand how a good Catholic novel can evangelize, I think most of the writers featured in this volume would have scoffed at the idea of setting out to write a book to convert their readers. Instead, the Catholic novelist is interested in crafting the best and truest story she can and leaving the rest up to the Holy Spirit.

It is also worth noting that none of the gifted writers in this volume are canonized saints, although some did live lives of inspiring personal holiness. Others celebrated in these essays may be controversial, with messy biographies and even complicated relationships with the Church. (Many had difficulty with the changes that followed Vatican II, for example. Others struggled with certain Catholic doctrines.) But if we used lack of scandal in a creative's life as the rubric for considering their work "Catholic"—if only flawless, respectable artists can apply—then we would certainly have to throw out some of the finest Catholic artists. We would miss out on Graham Greene's incredible novel *The Power and the Glory* and Caravaggio's stunning painting *The Conversion on the Way to Damascus*.

2. Flannery O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," in *The Flannery O'Connor Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2019), 167.

WOMEN OF THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION

The essays in this collection begin with Josephine Ward, who was born in 1864, and end with Donna Tartt, who was born in 1963. Their lives span over 150 years, from the American Civil War through the COVID-19 global pandemic. Some are American; others are English, Scottish, German, or Norwegian. There are twentieth-century American Catholic converts and members of English recusant families. Some are happily married; some are single mothers, divorcees, eccentrics, or mystics. In the essays that follow, you'll discover how these writers are connected to figures like Servant of God Dorothy Day, Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), Frank Sheed, and St. Philip Howard. Pope Benedict XVI read the writing of Gertrud von le Fort. St. John Henry Newman corresponded with Josephine Ward about her work. The connections are fascinating.

These inspiring women defy easy labels. Alice Thomas Ellis wrote cookbooks as well as novels, and unapologetically smoked cigarettes and drank with her friends while critiquing modern feminism. Toni Morrison, a convert who loved the Traditional Latin Mass and grieved its loss, became the first Black woman and the only American Catholic woman to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. I sometimes wonder if the women featured in this volume would have gotten along very well together. Some espoused very traditional views, while others challenged them. They have strong personalities and differing opinions on various movements, although they do not fit neatly into ideological boxes. But they are all baptized Catholics and inspired novelists.

The writers explored in this book are gifted in myriad ways, but they are especially able to portray a depth of female characters rarely found in literature. Some achieve this by exploring the domestic sphere in a powerful way. Few stories examine the experience of womanhood and motherhood like *Kristin Lavransdatter*, for example, in which Undset presents the demands of marriage,

pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and raising children as a sacred space in which God moves through joy and through suffering. I've been told by priests who read this epic that Kristin Lavransdatter helped them in their pastoral ministry by offering them a richer understanding of marriage and motherhood.

These writers bring their feminine genius to the task of writing novels, but this does not mean that their works are only for women. They are for anyone ready to encounter good novels that form a sacramental imagination. They are for readers eager to be challenged by works of enduring beauty to wrestle with truth. They are for everyone interested in deep questions and in search of a good novel. And a good novel can change your life.

Haley Stewart is the Editor of Word on Fire's children's imprint. She is the author of *The Grace of Enough*, *Jane Austen's Genius Guide to Life*, and *The Sister Seraphina Mysteries*.

Josephine Ward: Transforming a Heritage of Exile

Eleanor Bourg Nicholson

We have to thank Mrs. Ward for a singularly interesting and stimulating novel, in which, though the Roman Catholic standpoint of the author is never concealed, anything savouring of aggressiveness or proselytism is scrupulously avoided.¹

This review of Josephine Ward's 1906 *Out of Due Time*, which appeared in a major weekly British publication, may strike today's reader as scant praise. In fact, this is a remarkable statement, capturing Ward's singular contribution to English Catholic literature. This talented and popular novelist emerged from the complicated heritage of English Catholicism to engage upon a national scene. Alongside her husband, she served as a lynchpin between the tumultuous nineteenth century and the flowering of the English Catholic novel in the 1930s, boldly articulating to her readers the complicated reality of being an "English Papist." Her life united two critical threads of English Catholic identity: the heritage of martyrs and recusants, and the intellectual vibrancy of mid-Victorian conversion. This is represented in the patronage of two shining lights of the faith in England in the modern era:

1. Review from *The Spectator*, included in the front of the 1906 edition of *Out of Due Time*.

St. Philip Howard and St. John Henry Cardinal Newman, both of whom had a formative relationship with the novelist.

WARD'S RECUSANT LINEAGE

In the late sixteenth century, St. Philip Howard, the 13th Earl of Arundel and attainted Duke of Norfolk, suffered an eleven-year imprisonment in the Tower of London because he had returned to the faith. Queen Elizabeth I and her entourage sought to eradicate the papist taint among her subjects, declaring every act, ritual, or observance of Catholicism treasonous. She was able thereby to decree a bloody tidal wave of repressions and executions. Fearing, however, a strong negative public response if, after so much persecution and death, she ordered the execution of a high-ranking English peer, the queen commanded Philip Howard's imprisonment instead, until his death (of dysentery or of poison) in 1595.²

Since the slow martyrdom of St. Philip Howard, the Dukes of Norfolk have remained steadfastly recusant. In fact, this branch of the British peerage is unique in having maintained the faith since the sixteenth century. Within this heritage, there emerged a particular character of besieged English Catholicism, into which young Josephine Mary Hope, granddaughter of Henry Granville Fitzalan-Howard, 14th Duke of Norfolk, was born in 1864. The knowledge of the Elizabethan martyrs remained strong throughout Josephine's life; indeed, her final work was *Tudor Sunset*, an account of the last years of Elizabeth's reign. Ward wrote:

I started preoccupied with the heroism of my forefathers in the Faith, and I found my heroes, on closer inspection, most wonderful and yet quite curiously companionable; I felt not only spiritual and blood-relationship, but to me the lovable traits

2. See Joseph Pearce, *Faith of Our Fathers: A History of True England* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2022) for a full account of the ruthless ambitions of Queen Elizabeth I.

that are specifically English. They were never downhearted; they positively enjoyed ordinary hardships, and the smile of confidence and love provoked by adventure and peril would reappear between the torments of the rack, or in the sight of the butcher's knife that was to dismember the living bodies they had never greatly valued.³

The duke and his wife raised their children in accordance with a long-standing practice: the sons were raised according to the faith of their father, and the daughters as members of the Church of England. In the mid-Victorian period, however, the duchess and her daughters (including Josephine's mother) joined the ranks of converts. So too did the lawyer James Hope-Scott, Josephine's father, and William George Ward and his wife Frances, the parents of Josephine's future spouse. Josephine's parents both died by the time she was eight years old, and she and her sisters and brother were raised by their grandmother, then a widow and therefore the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk. The children would spend their formative years at Arundel Castle, the seat of the Duke of Norfolk, surrounded by the joint heritage of three hundred years of recusancy and the spirit of conversion that would so define mid-Victorian Catholicism. While the former element owed much to the patronage of St. Philip Howard, the latter would owe commensurately to the patronage of John Henry Newman.

NEWMAN AND WARD

Conversion was not to be lightly undertaken. Anti-Catholicism had received legislative sanction in 1534 when the Act of Uniformity forcibly united government and church. Subsequently, anti-Catholicism became a vital characteristic of true Englishness. By the nineteenth century, legislative change brought limited liberation. As England and her national Church struggled to

3. Josephine Ward, *Tudor Sunset* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1932), 10.

meet the challenges of science, empire, industrial and population growth, and the increasing of the political franchise, they also struggled with the ponderous question of the “priest-ridden” Irish. The result of this web of tension was Parliament’s passing of a bill granting Catholic Emancipation, signed on April 16, 1829, by a weeping King George IV.

Catholic Emancipation was followed by an increase of abuse against the papists in the 1830s. As was frequently the case, anti-Catholic abuse prompted a counter-development. 1833 marked the beginning of the “Oxford” or “Tractarian” movement, involving a series of “Tracts for the Times” by leading “High Church” members of the Church of England (nearly all of them intimately associated with Oxford University). These Tracts argued for a revitalization of the Church, a return to ancient religious roots, an emphasis on tradition and the writings of the Church Fathers, High-Church ritualism and ceremony, and authority. The work of the Oxford Movement concluded in 1841 with John Henry Newman’s notorious “Tract 90,” which signaled catastrophe for Anglicanism and revitalization for the papists. This document, with its seeming endorsement of many points recognizable as Roman Catholic, prompted uproar and fury against the High Church faction. Public confidence in Newman and in the Tractarian movement evaporated in the “universal storm of indignation with which the Tract was received.” Within four years, Newman entered the Catholic Church, and within two more years, he was ordained a priest of that Church.

A few weeks before Newman’s conversion, one of his most eager disciples, William Ward, also converted. “Ideal” Ward, so-called because of his *The Ideal of the Christian Church*—which was as enthusiastically condemned as Tract 90—would go on to become one of the most dedicated and zealous of converts, an ultramontane theologian and philosopher famous for his extremist views on the question of papal infallibility, desiring

“a Papal Bull every morning with his *Times* at breakfast.”⁴ The conversions continued apace, including the 1850 conversion of the wife and daughters of the Duke of Norfolk, noted above. In 1851, Newman delivered a series of lectures *On the Present Position of Catholics in England*. That same year, James Hope-Scott, Josephine’s father, converted.

As Newman commented in *On the Present Position of Catholics* in 1851, Catholicism was “the victim of a prejudice which perpetuates itself and gives birth to what it feeds upon,”⁵ a tradition pervading every point of culture, politics, and everyday life, “a tradition floating in the air.”⁶ Little wonder in this environment that one of the greatest temptations to recusant Catholics was to live as cloistered a life as possible, avoiding the hostile world outside the papist battlements. Long barred from participation in public life, they were content to remain where they were safe, and some viewed converts with marked suspicion. This is clearly shown in Josephine Ward’s first published novel, *One Poor Scruple*. The central family of the novel identifies their home as a place of religious pilgrimage, a “Home of the Persecuted” separate from the rest of England.⁷ “The persecuted had come, in many cases, to idealise the enforced seclusion and inaction of penal days.”⁸ English Catholics remained “so secluded and so inactive” and were “satisfied” in this situation, much to the frustration of proactive and assertive converts of the period.⁹

4. Maisie Ward, *The Wilfrid Wards and the Transition*, vol. 1, *The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1934), 8.

5. Quoted in E.R. Norman, *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), 13–14.

6. John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England: Addressed to the Brothers of the Oratory in the Summer of 1851* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893), 87–88.

7. Newman, 40.

8. Josephine Ward, *One Poor Scruple* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 39.

9. Ward, 42.

Such was not the attitude of Newman, nor of many who converted in that mid-century flood tide. The Newmanites represented a dramatic shift, establishing a strong population of engaged and intellectually respectable papists within the mainstream of English culture and public discourse. The English might eschew the Oxford Movement and resent Newman as a traitor, but they could not completely dismiss him. In his 1851 lectures, Newman called for a laity “not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it . . . an intelligent, well-instructed laity.”¹⁰

Following the enthusiastic engagement of her father, James Hope-Scott, and the example of both Newman and Manning, Josephine Mary Hope-Scott lived out this call for “an intelligent, well-instructed laity.” From an early age, she exhibited a commitment of both head and heart to the faith. Her literary talent was also apparent, as is shown by the response of the elderly Newman, to whom she showed an early fictional work in 1887. His response was one of the final letters written in his own hand. In it he sent strong encouragement and constructive criticism, including the note that “there is perhaps too much *direct* teaching and preaching in the Tale”—almost immediately followed by the reassurance: “If I was not pleased with your work, if I did not think it likely to do glory to God, if I did not love you and take an interest in you, I should not have written.”¹¹

DOMESTIC LIFE AND *ONE POOR SCRUPLE*

The promise Newman saw in Josephine would require some years yet to blossom. That same year she married Wilfrid Ward, and her

10. Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*, 390.

11. Ward, *The Wilfrid Wards and the Transition*, 1:152.

life became focused upon domestic matters and her husband's work. While Wilfrid as a young man followed uncertainly in his father's footsteps toward a more insular and extreme attitude to the faith, together with Josephine he would come to exemplify Newman's vision for the Catholic laity. Wilfrid went on to become one of the most significant English Catholic thinkers of his day. A remarkable essayist and biographer, his most notable works included biographies of his father, of Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, and of John Henry Newman, as well as close studies of Catholicism in England, from the Oxford Movement into the monumental questions posed by modernism in the first decade of the twentieth century. Further, Ward's work as the editor of the *Dublin Review* from 1906 to 1915 oversaw the publication of articles by G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and Francis Thompson, all of whom became personal friends of the Wards.

In addition to her loving support of Wilfrid and her intimate engagement with him on all theological, political, and historical topics, Josephine's life was quickly filling with maternal duties. Five children came in quick succession: Mary Josephine (called Maisie), Wilfrid (known as "Boy"), Theresa, Herbert, and Leo (who would later become a priest). Her own writing continued slowly. Inspiration was rife; in their early marriage, the Wards lived primarily upon the Isle of Wight, with the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson as their near neighbor.

In 1893, Josephine published a biography of St. Anselm through the Catholic Truth Society's *The Catholic's Penny Library*. Six years later marked the publication of Ward's first novel, *One Poor Scruple*. In it, the historical situation of English Catholicism is subsumed into an examination of the personal heritage of sin represented in the fall and death of young George Riversdale, the former heir to the estate of Skipton-le-Grange. The fruits of his sin haunt his surviving relatives, especially his widow, Madge, and his sister Mary. As a widow and a lapsed Catholic, Madge struggles with the temptation to accept the proposal of a divorced

man (a marriage that would fully alienate her from Catholicism), even as her devout sister-in-law recoils from a call to the religious life. Branded within and without by their allegiance to a Church defined as alien, these Catholics must navigate the reality of fin-de-siècle England and their inward souls. Success—and salvation—relies on the re-evaluation of self-identity and an embrace of the transformative power of sacramental grace, even within the complexities of modern life. Moving away from the stereotypically imposed conception of popery, the rising generation of English Catholics is forced to embrace the faith in a new and sincere way.

These nuances of conflict reflect another challenge that Ward's work clearly addresses. Josephine Ward's desire for an authentic English Catholic literature had little to no specific heritage on which to call. Maisie Ward notes this clearly:

Throughout the Church, but especially in England, there was an unmistakable artistic impoverishment. Thus the English Catholic who wished to write had to look far back into the past to find his Catholic fellows. Josephine Ward, who wished to write novels, was in a still worse case. For the novel is a post-Reformation product and up to the nineties there was no sufficient body of Catholic novelists to break the ground for her.¹²

One Poor Scruple is unequivocally Catholic as well as a masterfully executed novel that well deserves the positive reception afforded to it by Catholic and non-Catholic readers alike. Additionally, its reception testifies to a change in public feeling toward Catholicism itself. Increased secularism made the late-Victorian English audience more tolerant of loathed popery. Once again, Maisie Ward captures the conundrum of tolerance without comprehension:

12. Ward, 1:380.

The clear philosophy of life out of which the Classical English novel had come was dead; a note of interrogation had taken its place. The public was more willing than its grandparents had been to listen to a Catholic, but was one stage further from understanding what a Catholic artist was trying to convey. The critical vocabulary of the day did not contain the terms for an analysis of the deepest meaning of *One Poor Scruple*. But if there was not full perception, the praise was unanimous.¹³

Such success was a delight to the young author, and she continued to write alongside her duties as wife and mother.

Josephine's work was momentarily checked in 1901 by the sudden death of her eldest son, "Boy," from influenza that turned to meningitis. In this tragedy, the family turned ever more earnestly to the faith for consolation. Grief would bring an added note of empathy to Ward's writing in the future.

WARD'S CONTINUING CAREER

One Poor Scruple was followed by *The Light Behind* (1903), a novel enmeshed in English politics, living out the principle Wilfrid and Josephine both embraced that English Catholics should be involved in every aspect of national life. Three years later, at the height of the Roman Catholic engagement with and battle against modernism, Josephine's *Out of Due Time* (1906) appeared. Ward's close relationship with Baron von Hügel (whose work stopped upon the brink of the modernist heresy) and their intimate concern for both intellectual rigor and orthodoxy pervade this work. *Out of Due Time* tells the story of the temptations of modernism, seducing a charismatic young Catholic thinker. The novel does not merely contain Catholic characters or themes among other aspects; the novel is a poignant expression of English Catholicism at a critical point in history. In a special way, it captures the

13. Ward, 1:381.

personal suffering of Wilfrid Ward, whose faithfulness to the Church in this time of intellectual turmoil alienated him from many friends and former colleagues.

While the plots and concerns of *Great Possessions* (1909) and *The Job Secretary* (1911) are less ostentatiously Catholic, Josephine's recurring themes of temptation, sin, and the operation of grace are inescapable throughout both of these novels. The same can be said of the later novels *Not Known Here* (1921) and *The Plague of His Own Heart* (1925).

Most remarkable in this group of novels, however, is *Horace Blake* (1913). In this work, Ward provides an intimate psychological exploration of conversion and a vision of the prodigal son from a new and fascinating angle. The eponymous character is a playwright whose life has championed his own apostasy and frank atheism. At the end of his life and the beginning of the novel, however, he returns to the faith. He leaves behind him a wife and daughter, as well as an eager young disciple in the form of a journalist, who must unpack this radical shift. If this reversion is authentic and sincere, what does it signify for his life's work, to which the women in his family have dedicated themselves? If it is not, as they rather hope is the case, how can they cope with the emptiness of the gesture implied in the final days of his life?

LOSS AND DEEPENING FAITH

After *Horace Blake*, Josephine Ward's attention shifted for some time. Wilfrid's health was failing, and his death in 1916 left her bereft, once again turning for solace to the faith that sustained her throughout her life, as well as to the loving support of her children. Together with her eldest daughter, Maisie, Josephine embarked on the task of editing and publishing Wilfrid's final papers and lectures.

In addition to the distress of the loss of her husband, Josephine faced the tumult and "mental disintegration" that

came as a result of the First World War. Her children and grandchildren remained a primary concern, but she was distressed by the changing world, which contracted on a personal level with age and loss and seemed increasingly incoherent on a societal level. Her discouragement with civilization fueled her interest in “the great question of Mussolini,”¹⁴ culminating in her fictional portrait of the twentieth-century Italian dictator: *The Shadow of Mussolini* (1927). This novel, Maisie averred, “showed that at any rate there was an ideal alive in Italy. Mussolini might be wrong, he certainly was not futile.”¹⁵

To the discouragement, disintegration, and fragmentation of the post-war world, Josephine could only find one answer: that of faith. Thus, after the First World War, Josephine and Maisie became involved in the Catholic Evidence Guild, which was established in 1918 with the intention of presenting Catholic teaching to the populace through open meetings and street preaching. Maisie wrote later of her mother’s bravery in standing upon platforms in London parks, dressed in her traditional widow’s weeds, and speaking to an often hostile audience on such topics as “Our Lady,” “The Supernatural Life,” and “Christian Marriage”—to the shock of aristocratic acquaintances who sometimes recognized her.

Their work for the guild produced further fruit, both familial and literary. Maisie met her future husband, the Australian lawyer and burgeoning Catholic thinker Frank Sheed. With Josephine’s encouragement and the help of Leo Ward, the youngest of the Ward sons, Maisie and Frank established the Catholic publishing house Sheed and Ward.

The final years of Josephine’s life continued her service and engagement with the world:

14. Maisie Ward, *The Wilfrid Wards and the Transition*, vol. 2, *Insurrection versus Resurrection* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1937), 521.

15. Ward, 2:522.

In her little Kensington home there came together the most varied assortment of human beings, all seeking and all finding. It seemed almost in her later years as though, like the hermits of old, when she withdrew a little, the world followed her.¹⁶

Family, friends, converts, priests, authors, poets, aristocrats— innumerable people came to her for counsel and guidance. Her instincts remained ever literary, as is captured in this little scene described by her granddaughter Rosemary Middleton:

My Aunt Tetta was on the train in France with her mother and they passed a crumbling sort of chateau, obviously needing money spent on it. There was also a fairly new tennis court, though also sadly neglected. Granny commented rather dreamily that they must have built the tennis court in the hope of keeping the eldest son at home, but that, alas, it evidently hadn't worked. Tetta felt that perhaps only a novelist would instantly produce such an interesting interpretation.¹⁷

Ward's final novel, *Tudor Sunset*, was published in 1932, a year before her death. This fictional chronicle of the last years of the life of Elizabeth I provides a fascinating counterpoint to the better-known 1912 *Come Rack! Come Rope!* by Robert Hugh Benson. Without minimizing the bloody destruction wrought by "Good Queen Bess," Ward's compassionate approach to the blood-thirsty Tudor queen echoes the affectionate respect her saintly forebearer, St. Philip Howard, accorded the queen. The novel brings together the themes that had absorbed Ward throughout her life, especially Catholic identity and its relationship to patriotism and her conviction of the operation of grace. Her husband experienced a great deal of pain during "the Modernist controversy," because "it was not to him a sectarian controversy,

16. Ward, 2:532.

17. Author's personal correspondence.

but the vast question of the religious future of the human race.” In a similar way, Josephine’s concern for the operation of grace in the soul of Elizabeth I demonstrates her recognition that it was a vast question of the religious future of her nation and, even more critically, of a human soul.

The operation of grace, evinced in the life of the two saintly patrons of Josephine Ward and throughout her own life, remains the central point of her work and the key to her brilliance as a Catholic novelist, as well as her admirable qualities as a Catholic woman. Josephine had at one time intended to call her final novel *But One Death*, a reference to the words of St. Philip Howard. When the queen told him he had but to recant the faith to be restored to her favor, he replied, “Tell Her Majesty if my religion be the cause for which I suffer, sorry I am that I have but one life to lose.”¹⁸ The inscription he carved into the stone of his prison is still visible in the Tower of London: “Quanto plus afflictionis pro Christo in hoc saeculo, tanto plus gloriae cum Christo in futuro”—“The more affliction we endure for Christ in this world, the more glory we shall obtain with Christ in the next.”¹⁹ Josephine turned to these examples because, as her daughter attested, her “own secret” was that she greatly feared death.²⁰ This final novel serves as a personal prayer, in addition to the national prayer of the pious English Catholic, demonstrative of the heart of Christian hope:

Death in *Tudor Sunset* was not merely a peaceful passing; it was not only an offering for the soul of a nation and forgiveness of all enemies, it was, too, a triumph, a great bit of good news, a

18. Basil Hume, Homily given on the fourth centenary of St. Philip Howard’s martyrdom, Arundel Cathedral, October 25, 1995, quoted in Pearce, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 193.

19. *The Life of St. Philip Howard*, from a manuscript at Arundel Castle, edited by Henry Grenville, 14th Duke of Norfolk, in 1857 (Chichester: Phillimore & Co., 1971), 50.

20. Ward, *The Wilfrid Wards and the Transition*, 2:535.

fulfilling of joy. And it was all this because the martyrs partook of the Sacrifice of Christ.²¹

As the first rumblings of the book's success began to be audible, Josephine Ward quietly passed from this life, leaving behind a literary legacy to which more widespread attention is long overdue.

RECOMMENDED READING

Josephine Ward. *Horace Blake*.

_____. *One Poor Scruple*.

_____. *Out of Due Time*.

_____. *Tudor Sunset*.

Maisie Ward. *The Wilfrid Wards and the Transition*. 2 volumes.

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21. Ward, 2:536.