George Orwell noted in several of his essays of the 1940s that what he referred to as “political Catholicism” had been a central feature of intellectual life in England between the two world wars. Comparing au courant intellectuals’ recent interest in the Communist Party to the earlier influence of Catholicism, Orwell, writing in 1940, observed of the late 1930s, “It became as normal to hear that so-and-so had ‘joined’ as it had been a few years earlier, when Roman Catholicism was fashionable, to hear that so-and-so had ‘been received.’” Explaining that “nationalism” was “the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests,” Orwell noted in 1945 that “ten or twenty years ago, the form of nationalism most closely corresponding to Communism today was political Catholicism.” For Orwell then, this brand of Catholicism was more than a religion, more that is than a particular theology and form of worship. It was a political phenomenon, comparable to Communism or Fascism, and just as mischievous in his estimation.1

Orwell’s political Catholicism was the product of an articulate counterculture of self-consciously Catholic writers and artists—including novelists and poets, historians, an accomplished painter, a prominent sculptor, several publishers, and many journalists. That such a group developed in a nation of peoples who had defined themselves as Protestant for centuries is noteworthy. That many of these individuals were neither members of England’s old recusant Catholic community nor from among the recent generations of Irish immigrants who had accounted for the vast majority of the Church’s increase in England but were instead converts to Catholicism makes this religious dimension of interwar England extraordinary.
To most scholars, however, the notion that Catholicism had been an intellectual force in interwar England will come as a surprise. While the names Belloc and Chesterton remain familiar, they are likely to evoke the atmosphere of late-Victorian and Edwardian England—of opposition to the Boer War, of debates with Shaw and Wells, and perhaps of the prewar Marconi scandal. Not enough attention has been paid to the impact of Belloc and Chesterton after the Great War, and of the many Catholic writers and artists whom they influenced during this later period too little is heard. To be sure, Catholic novelists such as Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh have not been ignored, but of the many other prominent Catholic intellectuals of the era, of Eric Gill and Vincent McNabb, of Douglas Jerrold, Christopher Hollis, Douglas Woodruff, and Arnold Lunn, of David Jones, Tom Burns, Bernard Wall, and Michael de la Bedoyère, or of Frank Sheed, Maisie Ward, and Christopher Dawson—to name just a few—not much has been written beyond the odd biography and essay. That this group constituted an intellectual community of considerable weight and influence in these years has been, in general, lost on historians of the interwar frame of mind.

This book seeks to repair this neglect. It argues that the Catholic intellectuals in interwar England were not a disparate collection of individuals but a genuine community united not only by close personal ties but especially by ideology. The foundation for this community, I explain in chapter 1, lay in the ideas of Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), as promulgated in the years immediately before and after the Great War. Belloc presented a unified and self-consciously Catholic theory of government, political economy, and history. Coupled with his dynamic, confrontational personality, this ideology made its first influential converts, as I detail in the second chapter, in the persons of the Dominican priest and social critic Vincent McNabb (1868–1943), the sculptor and writer Eric Gill (1882–1940), and the prolific man of letters G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936). The members of this first generation of Bellocians, who had each, like Belloc himself, come of age in late-Victorian England, began to promote Belloc’s ideas almost as soon as he had proclaimed them.
The next generation of Bellocians, examined in chapter 3, included the author and publisher Douglas Jerrold (1893–1964), the journalist Douglas Woodruff (1897–1978), the historian Christopher Hollis (1902–77), the novelist Evelyn Waugh (1903–66), and the apologist Arnold Lunn (1888–1974). These writers were fundamentally of the postwar world, emerging in the 1920s and making their mark by the early 1930s. If the charisma and energy of the first generation helped Belloc to evangelize on behalf of his political and social gospel, effectively launching the English Catholic intellectual community, the new generation ensured that Bellocianism remained the unifying ideology for this community.

The fourth, and penultimate, chapter introduces a challenge to Bellocianism from within. Although much influenced by Chesterton and McNabb, the publishers Frank Sheed (1897–1981) and Maisie Ward (1889–1975) went in a different direction. In contrast to the political and economic focus of the Bellocians, they were interested in theology and philosophy, and particularly in new voices on the continent, from France and Germany. While neither Sheed nor Ward mounted a critique of Belloc, their onetime editor, Tom Burns (1906–95), was not so reticent. Although he began as an admirer of the Bellocians, and especially of Eric Gill, Burns and the participants in the salon that he hosted at his Chelsea home promoted, under the influence in part of the emerging historian Christopher Dawson (1889–1970), an aesthetic and philosophical vision at odds with Belloc’s agenda. However, the challenge of these Dawsonites to Belloc’s dominant ideology in itself did not mean the end of the community. Only with the onset of World War II, as described in the final chapter, was the integrity of the English Catholic intellectual community fully tested and ultimately compromised.

Historiography

To observe that scholars have neglected the English Catholic writers of the interwar period is not to maintain that they have been entirely
ignored. To that end, a word about the historiography of English Catholicism during these years is necessary. Indeed, an explanation of the genesis of this project will no doubt be of use in this regard, shedding light on what it attempts to accomplish and why it stands apart from recent scholarship on English Catholicism.

The research into the English Catholic intellectuals of the interwar period that culminated in this book began with a graduate seminar paper a decade ago on Christopher Dawson. The result was a brief intellectual analysis of Dawson’s work, which focused, naturally, on his published writings, in the field of both history and social criticism. Due to constraints of time, space, and lack of access to unpublished, archival sources, that paper paid no more than cursory attention to the intellectual milieu in which Dawson worked. Mention in Christina Scott’s Dawson biography of his interaction with the other Catholic writers of the era was intriguing and subsequently led to investigation of this intellectual milieu.

One of the most stimulating studies that my research uncovered was Adrian Hastings’s pioneering article, “Some Reflexions on the English Catholicism of the 1930s” (1977). Hastings identified a Catholic intellectual renaissance in interwar England, pointed to the influence of Belloc and Chesterton as integral to it, described the institutions that helped to sustain it, and argued that authoritarianism—ecclesiastical and political—was its ideological glue. Observing that this renaissance had dissipated in the 1940s, and indeed that the English Catholicism of the late 1930s had subsequently “fallen into oblivion,” Hastings attempted to account for the decline. World War II, he noted, had obliged English Catholics to support democracy in its battle against Fascism, causing them to “bury much of the sentiments of the prewar years”—a compelling point, as chapter 5 of this book explains. He also suggested that social changes following war, as well as the more restrictive leadership of Bernard Cardinal Griffin (1943–56) at the Archdiocese of Westminster, might also have contributed to the end of this intellectual revival.

Hastings provided a valuable introduction to the Catholic intellectuals of the interwar era, but had subsequent scholars followed his
lead? There seemed a need to scrutinize these Catholic writers and artists, to discover if, as Hastings had argued, they shared fundamental beliefs, to examine if their community had collapsed as dramatically as Hastings had supposed, and, if so, to explain why and how this had happened. Surprisingly, though a number of talented historians and literary scholars had written about these Catholic intellectuals, few had taken up the questions that Hastings had raised.

Until this book, there has been no full study of the English Catholic intellectuals active between the world wars. This is not to belittle the achievements of those scholars who have, particularly in recent years, examined these English Catholic writers, merely to point out that their concerns have not been those of this project.3 There have been new biographies of some, though by no means all, of the actors, as well as many articles treating the Catholic institutions and organizations of the period and examining Catholic opinion. But by their nature such efforts are not suited to the portrayal of such a large and active community over the course of nearly half a century. Biographers of key figures such as Maisie Ward and Christopher Dawson, for example, have noted the connection of their subjects to a number of like-minded thinkers, but given the close attention paid to an individual subject, it is difficult for the biographer to represent accurately and fully the group dynamic. Likewise, articles treating particular issues and events have been able to provide only brief, if important, glimpses into Catholic intellectual life.4

Most scholars who have addressed these Catholic intellectuals as a group have done so primarily in the context of a “literary revival.” The best of these, such as Ian Ker’s *Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845–1961* (2003), provide valuable examinations of the work of the most accomplished Catholic authors. Such scholarship is important in its own right, not least because it introduces readers to the work of writers otherwise neglected. In terms of portraying a community of intellectuals, however, this approach has also proved too circumscribed. To view Catholic intellectuals through a literary lens is most often to restrict one’s studies to the “great writers,” selected via aesthetic criteria. Yet their work accounted for only a fraction of
the contributions of Catholic intellectuals. As will become clear, Belloc, the mediocre novelist, was much more important to the English Catholic intellectual community than Chesterton, who wrote several very good novels. Likewise, Waugh’s friend Douglas Woodruff arguably had a greater impact on the community as editor of The Tablet than did Waugh through his own first-rate fiction, while Tom Burns, an editor and publisher who wrote almost nothing, was of more significance than his comrade David Jones, whose work ranks with the best of modernist literature, to say nothing of his accomplishments as a painter. It was their social thought rather than the quality of their fiction or poetry that united the Catholic writers of the era. To focus on Chesterton at the expense of Belloc, Waugh rather than Woodruff, or Jones instead of Burns makes it difficult if not impossible to capture the priorities and dynamics of this community of Catholic intellectuals.5

There has been work of significance on the Catholic intellectuals of interwar England as a group. Some of the most fruitful contributions have focused on their decline. In addition to Hastings, Joan Keating and Tom Buchanan have tried to explain when and why Catholic intellectual contributions diminished. Like Hastings, they have acknowledged the strong authoritarian streak among many Catholic writers during the period. Keating and Buchanan both observe that Christian democratic views became ascendant during World War II and remained so in its aftermath. The authoritarians who had predominated during the 1930s were marginalized during the war, in this interpretation, and discredited by the end of it. There is much to say in favor of this view, as I explore in this book. Valuable as their contributions have been, however, in their brief essays neither Buchanan nor Keating has had the necessary space to develop a comprehensive narrative and analysis concerning the Catholic intellectuals of the period. While they have provided a needed examination, for example, of dissension among English Catholic writers during the war and the change in Catholic thought after it, neither has portrayed satisfactorily the work of Catholic intellectuals before the war. Both have overemphasized the influence of a small minority of democratic-minded Catholics, those
who ended up on the winning side, as it were, after the war but whose influence, compared to the Bellocians, had been negligible before the war. Neither is able to provide, therefore, the necessary account of the community’s genesis and development, and even their theories concerning postwar events are couched in terms of transformation rather than the dissolution of a formerly vibrant community.6

Two other recent works treating English Catholic intellectuals also deserve specific mention. Both Patrick Allitt’s Catholic Converts (1997) and Adam Schwartz’s The Third Spring (2005) treat many of the same writers discussed here. Each of these volumes, like the literary studies mentioned above, is a significant work in its own right, but in the end neither presents a portrait of the English Catholic intellectual community that is both deep and broad enough.

Allitt provides a comprehensive survey of Catholic converts on both sides of the Atlantic from the nineteenth century until the eve of the Second Vatican Council. He is to be commended for this inclusive approach, which discusses many neglected intellectuals. In the end, though, Catholic Converts is too impressionistic, failing to treat many of these thinkers in sufficient depth. Indeed, while his narrative of the postwar period is concerned almost entirely with the United States, Allitt does not adequately explain why the contributions of the English converts, on which much of his discussion of the first half of the twentieth century focuses, declined so precipitously, noting only that there was a sense of disillusion among English Catholic intellectuals concerning their failure to transform the modern world.7

Schwartz’s volume suffers from the opposite problem. He provides a sustained and erudite examination of the work of his four subjects, with a focus on their conversion experiences. The chapter on David Jones, for example, is especially enlightening. Schwartz argues, correctly, that to understand the intellectual history of modern Britain one has to be familiar with the contributions of Catholic writers and artists and what he characterizes as their “rebellion against modern unbelief.” Indeed, he also recognizes that what these Catholic intellectuals were contributing to was not only a literary revival but also a cultural phenomenon, and he is rightly critical of those who would
study these writers in isolation rather than as contributors to “counter-modern communities of discourse.” In the last analysis, however, Schwartz’s approach—the selection of his four subjects based on their manifest talents—leads to the same weakness referred to above with regard to the literary studies. While Schwartz convincingly relates the ideas and experiences of Chesterton, Greene, Dawson, and Jones, his focus on four of the many intellectuals active during this period makes it difficult to grasp the broader group dynamic.

Finally, it should be noted that the focus of both Schwartz and Al-litt on converts alone necessarily downplays the contributions to the Catholic intellectual community of those who were not converts. The converts were very important, but so were “cradle Catholics” such as Belloc, Sheed, Ward, and Burns, to name just a few.

**English Catholicism before Belloc**

Before I turn to Hilaire Belloc and the foundation of the English Catholic intellectual community some historical context is needed. In order to comprehend the emergence of this intellectual community in the early twentieth century, it is necessary to appreciate the transformation that English Catholicism underwent in the nineteenth century. Only if one begins with a clear conception of where English Catholicism stood prior to the entrance of the Bellocians can one understand and accurately evaluate the English Catholic intellectual community.

At the end of the eighteenth century, English Catholics were just beginning to emerge from the penal period, during which they had been effectively excluded from national life. The Test Acts and the Oath of Supremacy had prevented them from holding offices under the Crown, and additional legislation affected their worship, the building and maintenance of their churches and chapels, their purchase and inheritance of property, and their education. Although these laws were rarely enforced after the early eighteenth century, their very existence meant that Catholics practiced their faith at the favor of the Protestant establishment.
Historians have portrayed eighteenth-century English Catholics (and even Catholics prior to 1850) as timid, isolated, and invisible. By 1780 the Catholic population had declined to 70,000 (from 115,000 in 1720), during a period in which the overall population of England and Wales had increased from 6 million to 7.5 million. English Catholics were confined, mostly, to communities in the northeast and in Lancashire, and led by a very few recusant families of the gentry and the nobility. Clerical power was minimal, as it was the laity that appointed and paid the clergy and administered church property. Nor did Catholic worship in England partake of the Roman devotions that had become commonplace on the continent. English Catholicism was rural and local, suspicious of clericalism, and distrustful of centralized authority.10

Beginning in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, however, English Catholics were brought into closer proximity not only to the broader society in England but also to Rome. In 1778 and 1791 Parliament passed relief acts that effectively did away with much of the penal legislation, and in 1829, after a protracted political campaign, Catholics were fully “emancipated” when the oath required to take a seat in Parliament and to hold office was revised. It was this struggle for emancipation, however, that began to transform the traditional, lay- and gentry-dominated English Catholicism, increasing the influence of Rome at the expense of local authority and clerical power, at the expense of the laity. This process would only accelerate during the coming decades.11

The chief feature of the Catholic Church in England during the nineteenth century was its growth, both institutionally and in terms of population. By 1851, the year of the noted religious census, there were an estimated 900,000 Catholics in England and Wales, a more than tenfold increase on the Catholic population of 1780, and by 1891 they numbered some 1.35 million. Even when one takes into account the fact that the total population had more than doubled from about 7.5 million to 17.9 million by midcentury and increased to 29 million by 1891, the growth rate of the Catholic Church was extraordinary. Most of this increase was the result of Irish emigration to England,
which had been minimal before 1800. The census reported 420,000 Irish-born men and women in England and Wales in 1841, 520,000 in 1851, 600,000 a decade later, and some 460,000 in 1891. Well over half the estimated 900,000 Catholics in 1851 were therefore Irish-born, and some have concluded that the Irish may actually have accounted for as much as three-fourths of the Catholic population in mid-Victorian England. Cardinal Manning, archbishop of Westminster from 1865 until 1892, could therefore maintain with some truth that he had “given up working for the people of England to work for the Irish occupation of England.”

The Irish immigration provided the major stimulus for the subsequent expansion in England of the Catholic Church as an institution. The building of new churches and the addition of many more clergy were required. Both challenges were to a great extent met. In 1840 there had been only 469 Catholic churches and chapels in England and Wales, but by 1891 there were 1,387. The clergy ministering to Catholics in England increased apace, from 788 in 1851 to 2,812 at the turn of the century. The Church also expanded in the area of education. In 1835 there had been a mere 86 Catholic primary schools in England, but by 1843 there were 236, capable of educating 38,207 students, and by the time Parliament passed Forster’s Education Act in 1870 the number of students had more than doubled to 101,556.

The growth in infrastructure was accompanied by a transformation in the government of the English Church. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church in England, because Rome had classified it as missionary territory, was administered by vicars apostolic, bishops who held titular rather than English territorial sees and whose authority was delegated directly from the pope. Since 1688 England had been divided into four districts, each governed by its own vicar apostolic. In 1840, in response to the Church’s growth, these were doubled to eight. The new division lasted only ten years; in 1850 Pope Pius IX restored the English hierarchy, creating thirteen dioceses (though England would remain a missionary territory until 1918). The archbishop of Westminster was to be the metropolitan, with the privileges of convoking provincial synods, appellate
jurisdiction, and precedence, though, crucially, the twelve suffragan bishops were not subject to his authority.14

As a result of the Church’s successes, some Catholics in mid-nineteenth-century England, including Cardinal Wiseman, first archbishop of Westminster, believed that England was returning to the Catholic fold. Indeed, a wave of accomplished converts in the 1840s, most notably from the Oxford Movement, the group of Anglican divines critical of the Erastianism of the Church of England, contributed to this triumphalism. The most prominent of these converts, John Henry Newman, though he was to become a restraining influence among English Catholics, indulged this fancy in his famous “Second Spring” sermon, preached at the First Provincial Synod of Westminster in May 1852. For Newman, the restoration of the hierarchy was “a miracle in the course of human events,” heralding “the coming of a Second Spring,” “a restoration in the moral world, such as that which yearly takes place in the physical.”15

The restoration of the hierarchy contributed to the Ultramontane revolution that transformed Catholicism throughout much of the world during the nineteenth century. Although it was the Catholic gentry, jealous of the power of the vicars apostolic, who had first pressed for the restoration, in the expectation that the authority of diocesan bishops would be more restricted, the first two archbishops of Westminster, Wiseman and Henry Cardinal Manning, proved to be the point of the Ultramontane spear that ultimately broke the power of Cisalpine lay leaders and their allies among the secular clergy. Greater Roman involvement with the English Church, combined with Pius IX’s increasingly combative stance toward modern, liberal Europe in response to the loss of the papal states during the 1860 unification of Italy, gave rise to a more militant and defensive Catholicism. This found expression most notably in Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors, which famously condemned the proposition that the “Roman Pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself to, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.” With the 1870 definition of Papal Infallibility at the Vatican Council, the victory of the Ultramontane party led by Manning, who had been a vociferous proponent of the
definition, was complete. Opposition to defining Papal Infallibility had been the last gasp of the Liberal Catholics in England, led by Lord Acton.16

Though Manning’s social work among the Irish poor in London and his support for Irish Home Rule often aligned him with both the developing labor movement and the Liberal Party, he proved to have more in common with the defiant “fortress” Catholicism of Pius IX regarding the relation of English Catholics to the broader society than with the Liberalism of Mr. Gladstone, who had after all sided with his friend Acton in 1870. In this respect, Manning’s attitude toward England’s two great universities was emblematic. Manning had been instrumental in 1864, while Wiseman was still archbishop, in getting the English hierarchy to prohibit Catholic matriculation at Oxford and Cambridge, and he ensured that this policy continued throughout his tenure at Westminster. This refusal to allow Catholics to study at the nation’s ancient seats of learning was characteristic of a siege mentality. The modern world was suspect. Catholics therefore had to keep their distance from secular and Protestant English society, or risk corruption.17

During the nineteenth century, then, Catholicism in England had emerged from the catacombs. English Catholics no longer tried to remain unobtrusive, as they had during the penal period, but instead sought confrontation with the greater society. The increase in the Church’s numbers, as well as the intellectual weight of recent converts, including Newman and Manning, and the restoration of the hierarchy had contributed to a more public, confident, and even triumphalist English Catholicism. This was the soil in which the English Catholic intellectual community would take root. Two streams were to nourish it. On the one hand, there was the new Ultramontane and illiberal culture that looked on the contemporary world with deep suspicion. On the other hand, there was the older tradition in English Catholicism, one that had declined in power as Roman and clerical influence increased, of an educated and independent-minded laity. Although these traditions had often been in conflict during the nineteenth century, both were to have a significant influence on the