

**G. F. WATTS**

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G. F. Watts by G. K. Chesterton

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**G. K. CHESTERTON**

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THE HABIT DOES NOT MAKE THE MONK.

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BY G. K. CHESTERTON

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*The Photogravures are from photographs by Fredk. Hollyer. Permanent photographs of works of Watts, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Holbein, and of pictures in the Dublin and Hague Galleries can be obtained of Fredk. Hollyer, 9 Pembroke Square, Kensington.*

**G**EORGE FREDERICK WATTS was born on 23rd February 1817. His whole rise and career synchronizes roughly with the rise and career of the nineteenth century. As a rule, no doubt, such chronological parallels are peculiarly fanciful and unmeaning. Nothing can be imagined more idle, in a general way, than talking about a century as if it were some kind of animal with a head and tail, instead of an arbitrary length cut from an unending scroll. Nor is it less erroneous to assume that even if a period be definitely vital or disturbing, art must be a mirror of it; the greatest political storm flutters only a fringe of humanity; poets, like bricklayers, work on through a century of wars, and Bewick's birds, to take an instance, have the air of persons unaffected by the French Revolution. But in the case of Watts there are two circumstances which render the dates relevant. The first is that the nineteenth century was self-conscious, believed itself to be an idea and an atmosphere, and changed its name from a chronological almost to a philosophical term. I do not know whether all centuries do this or whether an advanced and progressive organ called "The Eleventh Century" was ever in contemplation in the dawn of the Middle Ages. But with us it is clear that a certain spirit was rightly or wrongly associated with the late century and that it called up images and thoughts like any historic or ritual date, like the Fourth

## GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS

of July or the First of April. What these images and thoughts were we shall be obliged in a few minutes and in the interests of the subject to inquire. But this is the first circumstance which renders the period important ; and the second is that it has always been so regarded by Watts himself. He, more than any other modern man, more than politicians who thundered on platforms or financiers who captured continents, has sought in the midst of his quiet and hidden life to mirror his age. He was born in the white and austere dawn of that great reforming century, and he has lingered after its grey and doubtful close. He is above all things a typical figure, a survival of the nineteenth century.

It will appear to many a somewhat grotesque matter to talk about a period in which most of us were born and which has only been dead a year or two, as if it were a primal Babylonian empire of which only a few columns are left crumbling in the desert. And yet such is, in spirit, the fact. There is no more remarkable psychological element in history than the way in which a period can suddenly become unintelligible. To the early Victorian period we have in a moment lost the key : the Crystal Palace is the temple of a forgotten creed. The thing always happens sharply : a whisper runs through the salons, Mr. Max Beerbohm waves a wand and a whole generation of great men and great achievement suddenly looks mildewed and unmeaning. We see precisely the same thing in that other great reaction towards art and the vanities, the Restoration of Charles II. In that hour both the great schools of faith and valour which had seemed either angels or devils to all men : the dreams of Strafford and the great High Churchmen on the one hand ; the Moslem frenzy of the English Commons, the worship of the English law upon the