

T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr.

Recovering the “Honors of the West”

The priceless regalia of the Scottish kings—the crown, the scepter, the sword of state—are known as the Honors of Scotland. They are more ancient by far than the British Crown Jewels, and it is said that the gold circlet of the richly reworked crown was worn by Robert the Bruce. Despite their incalculable worth, the Honors of Scotland were put away following the union of the English and Scottish nations, and then were lost to memory for 150 years.

It was none other than Sir Walter Scott who, understanding their significance, used all the powers of his scholarship and imagination to deduce their forgotten resting place. After infinite pains, he himself lifted the Honors of Scotland from the dusty recess where they had been consigned by an earlier generation careless of its patrimony.

In our age, it was Russell Kirk who, with ground-breaking scholarship and moral imagination, rediscovered what we may call the Honors of the West. At a time when the American heirs to conservatism had fallen into forgetfulness of the great tradition, and liberal intellectuals had proclaimed its demise, Dr. Kirk, like the Walter Scott he so admired, lifted with his own hands our forgotten patrimony from dusty oblivion.

In his early work, Dr. Kirk treated modern exemplars of the conservative tradition from Burke to Eliot, but always with respect to their insights into timeless truths. Later, he more explicitly traced these eternal verities to their ancient historical roots,

and to their Source beyond history. All along the way he erected guideposts for those who would follow—all of us here and so many others—that we too might travel the path he had marked toward order in the soul and order in the commonwealth; that we too might discover the Honors of the West.

Friend or foe would occasionally address him as Professor Kirk—not realizing that he had held professorships no longer than he had to—such was his contempt for Behemoth University. But teacher he was, all his life. More than a few volumes on his long shelf of books were written explicitly to instruct the young, not to mention hundreds of college lectures from coast to coast, scores of Wilbur Fellows who served as his research assistants, or the Piety Hill seminars begun more than 20 years ago. As with Chaucer's Clerk, gladly would he teach and gladly learn.

Russell Kirk also taught by the example of his towering integrity. Here was the man of letters who, without the usual sinecures, actually lived by his pen. Here was the scourge of the Welfare State who quietly practiced the arts of private charity. He and Annette made their house a home to the troubled, to the dispossessed, to great eccentrics seeking refuge from the commonplace world. Who has not visited Piety Hill only to find himself dining with the deposed

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imperial family of Ethiopia, or a young person with grave family problems, or an intellectual expatriated from the totalitarian East. There was even the Burglar Butler who, before finding shelter with the Kirks, made his way by robbing church poor boxes, taking—as he said—only what was absolutely necessary.

Yes, Dr. Kirk taught us by the very nature of the household he established, graced by Monica, Cecilia, Felicia, and Andrea, and presided over by Annette with an encompassing love.

In January of 1993 Russell Kirk learned that he suffered from congestive heart failure, and realist that he was, understood that his remaining time was short. He took the news as no more and no less than an artifact of the human condition, and in his last year-and-a-half neither despaired in his spirit nor flagged in his Herculean literary feats. After all, this was a man who measured his intellectual pursuits in millennia and who planted trees throughout his life as a symbol of our duty to strive for good that we may not live to see.

Well into his seventies, Dr. Kirk could canoe on the rivers of Mecosta County or walk the hills of the Scottish Borders, only to sit down later at his typewriter and engage in learned disputation. This past December 19th, Dr. Kirk wrote me, "I fear that my days of canoeing and hill-walking are over," and then proceeded to outline a series of literary projects that daunted even in the reading. Since the onset of his illness in 1993, he had produced two of his most important works: *America's British Culture*, a consummate defense of our common patrimony against the destructive sallies of the multiculturalists; and *The Politics of Prudence*, a series of essays instructing the rising generation in the essence of conservative thought and exhorting them to nurture and transmit

their precious cultural heritage.

But perhaps the most significant work of his last days was the completion of his final literary gift to us, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict*. This 874-page treasure of a manuscript is currently being prepared for publication by Eerdmans Publishing Company and, according to Dr. Kirk, is a memoir humbly penned in the tradition of Julius Caesar and Henry Adams.

During his final illness, Dr. Kirk would gather his daughters around him to tell stories of his youth and of their family history—as well as an occasional Gothic tale. He mustered the energy to read aloud to his family Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather*, and, on Easter Sunday, Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*.

On his last morning, he heard on the radio that the Pope had slipped and fallen. He asked his family to join him in prayer for the Holy Father's recovery. At the end, he sat up in his bed at his beloved Piety Hill, and sank back with eyes closed. As Annette went for the nurse, two of his young daughters took his hands and began to sing the songs he had sung to awaken them from their childhood slumbers. He opened his eyes once more to the angelic voices that sang him to his rest. His life was gentle in the old sense; his death, in all senses.

The final works and days of Russell Kirk were at one with his long life. From across the ages the best minds of the West spoke to Dr. Kirk of permanent things which eclipsed the paltry preoccupations of our time, and he made those thinkers our contemporaries. It is across the ages that Russell Kirk's own voice will be heard by future voyagers embarked on the reflective journey toward order in the soul and order in the commonwealth. May they redeem for their time, as Russell Kirk has done for ours, the Honors of the West.