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Russell Kirk: Man of Letters —A Tribute Issue—

Without design or strong exertion, I have fallen into the best of lives, that of the independent man of letters—a dying breed, but one capable still of a shrewd cut or thrust before twilight.

—Russell Kirk, *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory*

It is fitting that *The Intercollegiate Review* celebrates its thirtieth year with a special tribute issue to one of the men who most informed its pages, Russell Kirk. Dr. Kirk died on April 29 of this year. One of the last of the post-World War II conservative intellectual giants to walk this earth, his person and his pen are irreplaceable.

In this special issue, some of America's leading scholars combine with some of the most promising writers of the rising generation to pay tribute to "Russell Kirk: Man of Letters." While Kirk is perhaps best known as America's leading exponent of conservative principles, he viewed himself principally as an historian of ideas and literary critic. He endeavored "to wake the moral imagination through the evocative power of humane letters." But Kirk was never a passive thinker, his strength of character and sense of moral obligation elevated the man of letters to its true stature—one who actively "points the way to first principles."

The range of Kirk's intellectual concerns is immense. George Panichas and Ian Boyd contribute essays considering Kirk's place in American letters and, according to Panichas, examine "those special qualities that unmistakably identify a man of letters and set him apart from the literati and intelligentsia of his generation." T. Kenneth

Cribb, Jr., chronicles Kirk's achievements and his last years on earth in a moving eulogy, while Frederick D. Wilhelmsen paints a personal and romantic portrait of Kirk, "the Wandering Seer of Mecosta."

The bulk of this issue, however, is focused on specific areas of Kirk's thought: The conservative mind in America and Europe and the conservative tide in public affairs, Gothic fiction and fantasy, economics, law and jurisprudence, American history, the American South, Burke studies, higher education, and much else besides. We hope the reader will find in this expanded thirtieth anniversary issue not only a consideration of the range of Kirk's interests, but also an exposition of reflective conservatism at its highest.

In 1953, Kirk, just out of St. Andrews University in Scotland and a young professor at Michigan State University, published his magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind*. Before that time social critics like Lionel Trilling could perceive no trace of conservative imagination to challenge the hegemony of liberalism. But Kirk "tossed into the stagnant pond of intellectualism" his *Conservative Mind*, and its waves are still being felt. Kirk's book was reviewed at length in *The New York Times Book Review* and *Time*, as

well as in countless other publications. His "fat book" launched not only one man's distinguished career, but an American political movement.

Kirk did not immediately fancy himself part of a "conservative movement." While he always considered himself a man of the Right, he wouldn't be pigeonholed by words such as "Right" or "Left"—labels that tend to lead one "into the trap of ideological infatuation." Rather, those eminent post-war literary figures who abjured the official liberal ideology and who seldom thought in political categories

may better be described as the literary party of order. It was order in the soul that chiefly interested them; but they knew, most of them, that the commonwealth too requires principles of order. Some of them were willing to be called conservatives, others not; labels are of no great consequence; they were no ideologues, no politicizers of humane letters.

If Kirk joined the lists of the "literary party of order," his sworn opponent was those adherents of the "literary party of disorder." Kirk stood forthright against the agents of disorder, those "nihilists, fanatic ideologues, and purveyors of violent sensation" who "present us with the image of man unregenerate and triumphant in his depravity." By the end of the 1950s, due in no small part to Kirk's efforts, the climate of opinion in America was slowly changing.

Kirk labored far from the centers of "publishing, book reviewing, and literary cocktail parties." Though he avoided the allure of certain literary circles, by the mid-50s Kirk was a prolific man of letters. In addition to *The Conservative Mind* and *Randolph of Roanoke*, his first book, Kirk published *A Program for Conservatives* (later entitled *Prospects for Conservatives*), *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, *St. Andrews*, *Academic Freedom*, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism*, and *The American Cause*. Additionally, he founded, in collaboration

with the publisher Henry Regnery and a few others, the quarterly *Modern Age*—which to this day remains what Kirk intended it to be: "an American protest against the illusions of the age."

His growing influence was felt abroad as well as at home. Kirk was told of an incident in London in 1954 when Hugh Gaitskell had entered a publisher's office, waving a copy of the Faber & Faber edition of *The Conservative Mind* and exclaiming, "This book will set back socialism a generation!" From the mid-50s until his death, Kirk frequently would find himself among the company of the leading literary figures of Europe. T.S. Eliot, Roy Campbell, Wilhelm Roepke, Wyndham Lewis, Otto von Habsburg, Max Picard, all were friends and allies, men of letters turned "tailors in the West, doing what they might to stitch together once more that serviceable old suit variously called 'Christian Civilization,' 'Western Civilization,' 'North Atlantic Community,' or 'the free world.'"

Kirk learned much from contemporary European literary figures—particularly Wilhelm Roepke and T. S. Eliot. Kirk admired Roepke because he recognized "that the art of political economy has an ethical foundation." Roepke was Kirk's economist, a stern opponent of socialism who never lost sight of the need to humanize economic structures, always believing "in government from local institutions upward, not in government by a centralized bureaucratic elite."

Next to Edmund Burke, the figure of his friend T.S. Eliot loomed largest to Kirk. Like his mentor Eliot, Kirk, too, "had sworn fealty to the permanent things, understanding that these permanent things are not the creations of men merely." Like Eliot, Kirk endeavored to "redeem the time, redeem the dream."

Eliot once confessed that he was never "concerned with the question of influence,

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or with those publicists who have impressed their names upon the public by catching the morning tide, and rowing very fast in the direction in which the current was flowing; but rather that there should always be a few writers preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter, in trying to arrive at the truth and set it forth, without too much hope, without ambition to alter the immediate course of affairs, and without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue." The proper concern for such a man, in Eliot's words, is "not the political, but the *pre-political* area—the stratum down to which any sound political thinking must push its roots, and from which it must derive its nourishment." Kirk also believed that a healthy social order must be possessed of men and women "preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter." It is precisely in this way that the man of letters exerts an influence and affects political

life. And it was in such a way that Russell Kirk, never intending to, found himself spokesman for one of this century's most powerful political movements.

Of T.S. Eliot Kirk would write, "What Eliot's revolution in literature gave to his age was a renewal of moral imagination—with social consequences potentially." In his age, Russell Kirk effected a similar revolution in politics and humane letters—with social consequences actually.

By the 60s, Kirk was an established author and public personality; by the 80s he was hailed as the father of modern American conservatism and was among the speakers most in demand on college campuses. Kirk lived to see the intellectual movement to

which he had contributed so much from its haphazard beginnings become "a popular cause—nay, a high tide in the affairs of men."

From the mid-60s until his death this year, he would add more than twenty books to the ones aforementioned, including major works such as *Eliot and His Age*, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, and *The Roots of American Order*. He could also boast of an acclaimed corpus of fiction, including *A Creature of the Twilight*, *Lord of the Hollow*



Russell Kirk in front of his library (1993).

Dark, *The Surly Sullen Bell*, *Watchers at the Strait Gate*, *Princess of All Lands*, and *Old House of Fear*. Kirk "had become literally a practicing doctor of letters, an emulator of Dr. Samuel Johnson, but did not live on New Grub Street."

Unlike so many literary men of this age, Russell Kirk was no alienated man. Rather, Dr. Kirk was a totally "integrated" man. For those of us who knew him well, and who read the range of his scholarly work, this is an obvious though not always acknowledged fact. As Ian Boyd argues, the integration of Kirk the man and Kirk the writer was complete. The reader of Kirk's works was never disappointed upon meeting Russell Kirk. He not only wrote about the need for roots, he was himself a rooted man, prefer-

ring the quiet of his "quondam factory"-turned-library and the planting of saplings to the company of any number of self-proclaimed intellectuals.

Throughout his life Russell Kirk sought after truth. His friend Gerhart Niemeyer, in a eulogy delivered at Dr. Kirk's funeral mass and published in the recent number of *The University Bookman*, has best captured Kirk, seeker of truth:

Did he not strike us as one always searching, always open, always ready for truth? Of course not just the truth of speech, the truth of facts: rather the truth of living, which comprises the other truths. More than any other person I know, Russell Kirk was hot on the trace of truth, quick to defend it, happy to be subject to it. He was, manifestly, a *knight* of truth. He proudly wore its shining armor, he ever had his hand on the hilt of its sword, and he never counted a victory in its service as a time for rest. No human being could confer on him the nobility of this calling: it was his distinction, in our age that is so poor of distinctions.

For nearly all of his seventy-five years, Kirk was an embattled knight-errant; writing furiously against the barbarians scaling our civilization's walls, he meant to die in his saddle. However, unlike the "sorrowful countenance" possessed by another knight, Don Quixote, Kirk, in his own words, "generally kept a cheerful countenance, to the vexation of certain reviewers of his books." Chesterton once described George Wyndham as "the last knight." Were Chesterton to have known Russell Kirk he surely would have made room for one last modern knight.

In the epilogue to his soon-to-be-released

memoirs, *The Sword of Imagination*, Kirk says "that he came to understand that he sought, during his lifetime, three ends or objects. One had been to defend the permanent things...[to remind] people that truth was not born yesterday. A second had been to lead a life of decent independence, living much as his ancestors did, on their land, in circumstances that would enable him to utter the truth.... A third end had been to marry for love and to rear children who would come to know that the service of God is perfect freedom." Kirk died full of gratitude, his ends having been met.

During a half-century of literary conflict, Russell Kirk brandished his sword of imagination. He made more than a few shrewd cuts and thrusts at foe in defense of the permanent things. While he is no longer with us physically, his legacy will live on through his more than thirty books, his several hundred articles and essays, his hundreds of newspaper and magazine columns, his voluminous correspondence (which in itself amounts to a history of twentieth-century conservatism and humane letters), his countless disciples, and through the recently founded Russell Kirk Center at Piety Hill.

Gustave Le Bon has written that "the dead alone give us energy." Alive, Kirk was a man of indefatigable energy; he leaves us with a corpus of work that strikes brilliantly against the dark night of our age. What Kirk wrote of his friend, the poet-adventurer Roy Campbell, seems more apt when applied to him: "Dead? Not that incandescent soul."

—Jeffrey O. Nelson

