

Prophet of American Higher Education

Russell Kirk is best known for his powerful defense of political conservatism, yet even a cursory glance through Charles Brown's *Russell Kirk: A Bibliography* (1981), reveals that between 1936 and 1981 he wrote far more on the problems of American higher education than on any other subject. In our correspondence of more than 400 letters over four decades, his most recurring concern and deepest feelings were on the ever increasing degeneration of our nation's colleges and universities. His insights into the whole course of education in America were incredibly prophetic. *The Conservative Mind* (1953) launched the politically active tradition of modern American conservatism during the last half of the twentieth century, but it was in his extensive writings on education that Kirk sought to preserve "the permanent things" in American society.

Kirk believed that family life together with religion and education provided the main cultural basis of a healthy society. These basic institutions furnished the moral and cultural clothing for mankind. Together with the arts, when these institutions fulfilled their proper function the result was a strong and active culture, with mature and responsible individuals who achieved temporal happiness and shaped the character of their society and its legal

and political system, enabling the nation to prosper in a well-ordered, free, and just society. The role of education in this complex process was of paramount importance. In many respects it superseded both politics and economics in the hierarchy of a nation's values.

Perhaps no American was better fitted than Russell Kirk to assume the difficult role of constructive critic of American higher education. His teaching experience at Michigan State College and several other institutions as a guest professor, his lectures between 1951 and 1994 at about 500 American schools, and his role as the director of the social science division of the Educational Research Council of America in reforming textbooks in secondary education, provided him with an intimate in-depth knowledge of the state of education. His syndicated newspaper column, "To the Point" (from April 1962 to August 1975), his regular featured page "From the Academy," in *National Review* (1955-1980), and his own quarterly, *The University Bookman* (1960-1994), enabled him to publish scores of articles on particular problems and achievements in American education. Also,

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he supplemented these regular and frequent publications with numerous occasional articles in other journals, in book reviews, and in three important works: *Academic Freedom: An Essay in Definition* (1955), *The Intemperate Professor* (1965), and *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning* (1978).

Before noting Kirk's critical strictures of American education it is useful to ascertain his own positive philosophy of education. He believed that the greatest single objective of genuine education was the highest possible inner development of students—their intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and social nature—and that schools, like the other basic institutions of civil society, were merely the necessary instrumental means to that ideal end. He regarded the liberal arts and humanities as the soundest form of education to fulfill that objective. Therefore, in essence he held to a modern practical adaptation of the Medieval *quadrivium* and *trivium*—the seven liberal arts of grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy, plus the humanities—history, *belles lettres*, philosophy, politics, the ancient classics, the fine arts, languages, ethics, and science. He found in John Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1852) the ideal modern expression of his own philosophy of education, and in Irving Babbitt's humanism its practical application in the twentieth century. Kirk's own sixty-eight page "Introduction" to Babbitt's *Literature and the American College* (1986) contains the best sustained statement of his theory of education, and provides both the positive and negative basis of his critique of American higher education.

Kirk's basic principles and positive views on education are identical with many of his conservative premises in politics. The writings and speeches of Edmund Burke provided him with his broadest conception of European culture and Western civilization.

Orestes Brownson did much the same for American society. Burke's vital concept, a "Christian commonwealth of Europe," also shaped Kirk's sense of historical continuity and experience. His largest frame of reference for modern culture and civilization derived from the ancient Greek and Roman world of art, philosophy, law, and politics, from the customs and manners of Germanic tribes that overran the Roman Empire, and from their caption in the spiritual and moral principles and traditions of the Judeo-Christian religion. Burke's political philosophy, centered in moral natural law, constitutional law, legal prescription, prudence as the first of political virtues, prejudice as moral habit, and the strong claims of local sovereignty in laws—all these articles of faith and other related ideas were absorbed into Kirk's conservative political and educational philosophy. Like Burke he also held to the orthodox Christian view of the innate moral nature of man as created in the spiritual image of God but in the fallen state, and therefore capable of much good or evil. Kirk believed that the potential good in man can be realized only on condition that he redeems himself through acquired grace and institutional self-discipline. He rejected the opposite doctrine, taught by Rousseau, that man is by his innate nature born good but becomes corrupt by his institutions. These convictions form the often unvoiced premises in Kirk's conservatism in both politics and education, and provide the basis of his criticism.

Like his eighteenth-century Whig mentor, Kirk rejected abstract theoretical reasoning based upon a supposed pre-civil "state of nature" and "social contract," the assumed basis of much modern ideology in both politics and education. He was also at one with Burke in his criticism of the rationalism of the French *philosophes* and the speculative theories of the Enlightenment. He too rejected the "idyllic imagination"

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and sensibility of Rousseau, which displaced the Christian conception of man's innate moral nature with a belief in natural goodness, the whole basis of modern theories of "progressive education." Kirk's criticism of Bentham's utilitarianism and John Stuart Mill's humanitarian rationalism, and his attacks on the collectivist positivism and sociology of Auguste Comte, applies to their ideological theories in both politics and education. It is not surprising, therefore, that he describes the triumph of liberal decadence, purposelessness, and intellectual disorder and intolerance that characterized much higher American education after the 1960s in political terms: "Jacobin democracy had triumphed in the American college."

In his critique of American higher education Kirk made excellent use of his very extensive reading in history, literature, philosophy, and politics, yet his method was not that of a scientifically-oriented academic scholar. Nor was he, as some of his liberal and "neo-conservative" critics claimed, merely a modern facile journalist. In essence Kirk was a superb man of letters in the best tradition of such English Victorian models as J.F. Stephan, Henry Maine, Walter Bagehot, W.H. Mallock, and George Gissing, whose counterparts in the twentieth century were G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and Christopher Dawson. In America this tradition of humane letters and philosophical reflection was found in the "moral imagination" of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, and beyond their humanism in the poetry and social thought of such very different conservatives as T.S. Eliot and Robert Frost.

Perhaps no American understood the depth and seriousness of the growing cultural crisis of the twentieth century better than Russell Kirk. His views on American education, like his perceptions on politics, were in direct opposition to the long estab-

lished and prevailing liberal orthodoxy. He knew that at every level through high school public education was totally controlled by "educationists" steeped in the secular "progressive" educational theories of John Dewey, a disciple of Rousseau. In "progressive education" the "child-centered school" gave free choice to ignorant students in determining the curriculum, in matters of discipline, and in setting standards of mediocrity as the norm for academic achievement and graduation. After the passage of federal civil rights legislation, educational theories aimed at equality of condition made social and psychological adjustment, rather than intellectual excellence, the great objective of secondary education. This resulted in large numbers of semi-literate and badly alienated high school graduates.

Kirk was well aware of the entrenched power of the educationists who opposed meaningful programs in the liberal arts and humanities in American high schools. Many teachers and administrators were products of a system of teacher certification that was more concerned with methodology than with mastery of subjects to be taught. This resulted in teachers who were ignorant of their subject but skillful in specialized techniques, and who sacrificed substance for mere form and the appearance of education. Kirk knew that the administrative structure in high schools was invariably staffed by teachers who had majored in education rather than in an academic subject, so that high school principals had no philosophy of education and knew little about the liberal arts and humanities. Administration was more often an end in itself rather than an instrumental means of education, and principals and superintendents were infatuated with surveys, statistics, descriptive sociological studies of various kinds, and public relations imagery, rather than with the quality of education received by students. Kirk perceived that the failure

to distinguish education from training often resulted in the triumph of a utilitarian-materialist theory and practice which made a narrow vocational training the central concern of high schools. But worst of all, the theory that our schools should be made into the instruments for solving America's social, racial, and economic problems, by creating equality of condition among all students, in order to establish an egalitarian democratic society, completely subverted the purpose of education. This theory, backed by the bureaucratic authority of the federal government and federal courts, reduced many inner city high schools to morally decadent centers of organized anti-intellectual chaos, the triumph of nihilism and decadence over any meaningful institutional authority or education of almost any kind.

After World War II, Kirk perceived that the voluntaristic, cafeteria-style, mass production system of socialized secondary education, with all its attendant evils, increasingly was extended into college education, with equally disastrous results. His detailed accounts and reflections upon the cultural corruptions that afflicted American higher education during the last half of the twentieth century are nothing short of prophetic. He contrasted what was happening to the conditions which prevailed before the Second World War, when colleges and universities were still dominated by humanists well-educated in the liberal arts. High standards of scholarship and classroom teaching were dominant, and there was general agreement that the great aim of education was the highest possible cultural development of students, and education was not identified with mere job training.

After 1945, with the mass influx of former soldiers financed by federal government grants, a notable shift became evident in the politicization of higher education through

the emerging dominance of liberal and Marxist professors, particularly in social sciences and literature. Gradually these self-righteous, self-styled ideological "intellectuals" displaced the liberal arts humanists. A spirit of intolerance grew toward traditional subjects, with particular hostility against the origins of Western civilization. The concept of the university as a community of scholars was displaced by a semi-totalitarian liberal-Marxist coalition of ideological collectivists. During the 1960s this movement burst forth in militantly aggressive revolution at the University of California at Berkeley, at Cornell, Columbia, the Ivy League schools, and on many other campuses. The cowardly capitulation of administrators, trustees, and faculty in yielding to the demands of the revolutionists revealed the almost total lack of moral character and courage in the leadership of many in the academy.

In 1955, Kirk began his twenty-five year association with *National Review* with the introduction of his bi-weekly column, "From the Academy." The very titles of his columns on American higher education reveal his perceptive insight into what was happening, and his reflections on events correctly prophesied the even worse developments that were to occur: "The University Imperialists" (1955); "Behold Behemoth" (1956); "The Educationists' Utopia" (1956); and "The Stranglehold on Education" (1957). When Kirk launched the quarterly *Modern Age* in 1957, he defined conservatism as aiming at "conserving the best elements in our civilization," which, he warned, "are in peril nowadays," particularly in education. He defended community life and "the wisdom of our ancestors," and urged Americans to keep alive and strong "the legacy of our civilization," and to reject "doctrinaire radical alteration." He continued this theme in later columns in "From the Academy": "The Educationist

Power Elite" (1959); "The Future of Toleration in Our Universities" (1960); "Federal Aid to Educational Bureaucracy" (1961); "Why Aren't Teachers Good?" (1962); "Swollen Universities" (1963); and "Decadence in the American University" (1969).

Among Kirk's favorite targets of criticism were the self-serving administrators and bureaucrats who cared little or nothing for meaningful quality education; they were to him empire builders who treated schools as a means to their own career advancement. In 1953, he had resigned in protest from Michigan State College, charging the administration with "a progressive lowering of standards" by admitting large numbers of illiterate students, and debasing its curriculum with mindless programs such as "Outdoor Education," which included graduate credits for courses in fishing, fly-casting, canoeing, and hunting. Michigan State College had been a fairly good land grant school of fewer than 5,000 students, but under the administration of its newly appointed president, John A. Hannah, it mushroomed swiftly into Michigan State University, with over 30,000 so-called students. Kirk attacked the academic credentials of Hannah, whose highest earned degree was a B.S. in poultry husbandry. He noted that through the influence of his father-in-law, who was a member of the Board of Trustees, Hannah was given an honorary degree so that he could call himself "Dr. Hannah," and on this fraudulent basis he was appointed president of Michigan State College. He proceeded to convert the college into a mediocre mass production "Behemoth" by vastly expanding its football program, abandoning academic standards, and granting degrees to large numbers of semi-literate students. The corruption of

higher education under Hannah's leadership was for Kirk the archetypal example of what went wrong with American education after the Second World War.

Kirk also attacked the subversion of quality education by the National Education Association, an organization wholly dominated by the left wing of the Democratic Party. He noted that the massive subsidies of the federal government which passed through the hands of NEA administrators created a monopoly that radically politicized education at every level. These subsidies destroyed academic freedom by making universities slavishly dependent upon the federal government. Kirk warned that the doctrinaire intolerance of the professional "educationists," combined with the ideological fanaticism of the radical liberal-Marxist coalition, would end by excluding from the academy every student and teacher who rejected their politics. He anticipated the degeneration of American higher education into the adversarial sub-culture of the 1960s and the alienated cultural wasteland of racial quotas in hiring and promoting faculty and admitting and graduating students. He predicted the introduction of "Black Studies," "Women's Studies," "Environmental Studies," and other such non-intellectual programs. These were preliminary corruptions to the solipsistic anarchy of the doctrinaire deconstructionists and ideological "politically correct" fanatics who came to dominate the academy in the 1980s. To understand what has happened to American education and culture, one could not do better than to read Russell Kirk's description and analysis of the clever charlatans, parvenues, calculating sophists, and expedient cowards who control the American academy, and reflect the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of our nation's culture.