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Frederick D. Wilhelmsen

The Wandering Seer of Mecosta

The Unbought Grace of Life:

Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk edited by James E. Person, Jr.
Sherwood Sugden & Co., Peru, IL, 1994.

Russell Kirk read the essays collected in his honor and entitled *The Unbought Grace of Life* shortly before he died, and I am told he took pleasure in its contents. This *Festschrift* is worthy of the man it honors. Divided into two sections, the first chapters are given over to "The Man and His Works" and the second, "Redeeming the Time: Essays by Diverse Hands," to specific topics, thus following the classical *genre* of this kind of book. They reflect admirably the catholicity of Dr. Kirk's own wide range of interests. Among these essays, following the curve of my own interests, I recommend highly Gerhart Niemeyer's "Millenarianism and Revolution"; Paul Gottfried's "Historical Consciousness in Antiquity"; "A Strategy for Freedom" by Archduke Otto von Habsburg; "Journalism as Parable" by Father Ian Boyd; and "A Proper Patrimony: Russell Kirk and America's Moral Genealogy," by the late M. E. Bradford, who resembled Kirk in so many ways. Some of the chapters are followed by short italicized paragraphs containing eulogies to Kirk written by men prominent in the affairs of state, including the Governor of Michigan and former President Ronald Reagan.

Among the earlier studies dedicated to

the man Russell Kirk I was struck most especially by John A. Lukacs' tribute to "An Exceptional Mind, and Exceptional Friend." His writings, remarks Lukacs shrewdly, "have reflected both the Royalist and the Puritan aspect of his *persona*, of the Cavalier and the Covenantor at the same time—though the former of these pairs may have gradually gained their ascendancy. He is more Cavalier than Covenantor in his aspirations, while perhaps both Tory and Puritan in his temperament." Personally I put down this shift, this tilting, to Kirk's conversion to the Catholic Church. As a personal friend of Russell's I read with pleasure his daughter Cecilia's "The Box of Delights: A Literary Patrimony" where she speaks fondly of her father as a teller of tales to his children. Wisely noting that these tales were always told for pleasure but that they released as well the imagination that it might

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roam through a world charged with magic, glimpsed but never quite captured, Kirk's daughter fingers what must have been an enchanted childhood bewitched into being by a magician. The young lady is an admirable stylist. Her father transfigured everything his wand touched and invested it with awe, a brooding aura of the preternatural, a glow of that *excessus* of which St. Thomas Aquinas spoke which makes of each thing more than it is.

It is to this quality in Kirk as a wandering seer that I wish to address my reader in this short review essay. Russell Kirk was essentially a poet who wrote in prose, a prose always felicitous and often elegant. He wrote what he did because the malaise of the civilization he loved so deeply called forth from him the duty of being both the restorer of good things about to be lost and the imperative to name, confront, and battle the evils now visited on that same world order which once was the Christian West. Of no other man in our century can it be said that he, almost alone, brought back to the forum an inheritance which in his youth had been virtually forgotten. *The Conservative Mind* and its amazing success in the very teeth of a liberal establishment that wins by silencing its critics attests to the victory of his achievement. As far as his powers as a social critic are concerned we need only think of *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* where his prose style reached a level of excellence possibly not surpassed in this kind of writing in contemporary English.

I first met the man in a hotel in San Francisco. He sought me out because I had reviewed *The Conservative Mind for Commonweal*. He struck me then as an essentially shy man who preferred to listen rather than talk. Being a very young man, I had little worth saying. Later I came to know him well when he visited me and my family in Avila, Spain. Both the doctor

from St. Andrew's and the doctor from Madrid had more than enough to say to one another. Our friendship was instantaneous. Kirk busied himself with climbing the old walls, the best preserved in Europe, rummaging around every church and monument of this venerable medieval town, as he relentlessly mastered both the archeology and story of "The City of the Kings and the Knights." We put on puppet shows for my children. Before he left he had already come to be a teller of tales, some kind of a genie released from a bottle, almost a gnome, a figure of magic wrapped in a Scottish cape, enchanting three wide-eyed girls.

Kirk marched me through old Madrid, known as "The Madrid of the Austrias" because it flourished during the reign of the House of Habsburg in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That man hurried me through cobbled streets and alleys, gnarled stick in one hand and a Baedeker in the other, head resolutely erect, his little turned up nose sniffing every new smell of the old streets, his pale blue eyes ever at the ready to the portent of adventure. Kirk never tired. Every corner was a new world to be won and a challenge to be met. He took a special interest in poking through ruined churches sacked by the Communist hordes some twenty years earlier. Nothing he saw was simply itself. With Kirk everything was charged with history. Centuries fell away and the *barrio* was choked with the chatter of long dead courtiers and *caballeros*. I repeat my thesis: Kirk was a magician. He saw what was there to be seen but he conjured up the story of every window and house we passed and all of this thanks to his privileged imagination.

Russell Kirk was a simple man, even a naive man. Let me attest to this last observation with a story. We found ourselves once in the old hotel Mayorazgo in Madrid where Russell was preparing an address to be given at the renowned *Ataneo*, a private club where

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only illustrious academicians mounted the podium to speak to an audience composed of the most blue of bloods and the pick of Spain's intellectuality. A friend of mine, Enrique Serrano, tricked Kirk into believing that he should speak in Spanish, even though the poor man had studied the language for only two years in high school. Enrique and I spent the night converting the text into Spanish. The following morning the two of us collapsed in our beds but Russell was still wide awake in a room perfumed and choked with the smell of brandy and cigars. Kirk gave his address that evening and there was not a soul who understood a word he said. Every word of his splendid lecture, translated by Serrano into flawless Castilian, was pronounced with an English accent. Neither Enrique nor myself had thought to tell him that a Spanish word mispronounced is not understood as mispronounced by a Spanish speaker: it is not understood at all! No harm was done and a good time was had by all. Kirk recovered in the question and answer period where he reverted to English and since his picked audience was larded with bilingual folk his message was eventually driven home. His subject: the very conservative movement he had launched in the United States. That night we celebrated his triumph in a night club but Russell was bored. It was the only time I recall having seen him bored.

Russell was not a man of the salon. He was not even principally a man of the academy despite his columns on education that ran for years in the *National Review* and his editorship of *The University Bookman*. Save a few short stints as a professor, Russell was possibly the last man in the United States to make his living as a man of letters. As Henry Regnery notes in his contribution to *The Unbought Grace of Life*, Kirk confessed in a letter early in his career that his needs were few and he could get on with five hundred

dollars a month. This was written, of course, at a time when five hundred dollars were far weightier in the pocket than they are today and it was written before his somewhat late marriage and his ensuing familial responsibilities. But the statement does contain a



An avid walker, Kirk's hikes were, for his guests, an occasion to hear a master storyteller weave a yarn—or two.

profound truth.

Russell Kirk at heart was not a settled bourgeois. He was a wanderer, but a wanderer who knew that there must be an inn at the end of the road. He found that in his duchy at Piety Hill in Mecosta, Michigan, but let us not forget that he experimented, not altogether successfully he told me, with restoring a crofter's cottage in the north of Scotland. This man to whom we owe so much as the standard bearer of the Good

Things God has given us in a world ravaged by savagery and flattened by banalities was a romantic at heart. He called himself a Bohemian Tory in a book of essays of the same name, but whereas nineteenth-century Bohemians rejected all order in a picturesque protest against their age, Russell Kirk protested against an age without any order at all of its own. He was a Tory in that he longed for a settled society in which each man stands upon and occupies a place all his own and plays out a role in life as does a musician in an orchestra, a role personal and hence unique but altogether knit into harmony because part of a whole larger than himself. Kirk abominated egalitarianism not only due to its evil but because that evil is compounded by boredom. Read his "York and Social Boredom" in *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*. There is an aesthetic dimension to Kirk's criticism of contemporary society but it is an aesthetics charged with ethical imperatives.

There is very little of formal syllogistic

reasoning in the writings of Russell Kirk. He rarely took an issue, marshalled all the arguments in favor or against his thesis, and then galloped them home to a crescendo conclusion as did, for example, Chesterton in the final paragraph of his *What's Wrong With the World*. Kirk monstrated rather than demonstrated. Russell Kirk sized up his topic, walked around it, probed its peculiarities, smelled the wind, and then enveloped the whole in his Christian vision of Good and Evil. That vision invariably ended in a judgment suffused with a wisdom which our ancestors called prudence. It is fitting that his last book be called *The Politics of Prudence*.

Russell Kirk was not only a good man; he was God's Man. To students at the University of Dallas he ended a lecture some years ago on "The Supernatural" with the following words. I remember them by heart. "If you look for the Supernatural, you will find it. I promise you: I have."

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