

Russell Kirk's "Southern Valor"

M.E. Bradford, who departed this vale of tears one year before his friend Russell Kirk, published an appreciation of Kirk in the pages of *The Intercollegiate Review* eighteen years ago. He likened Kirk, aptly, to his "neglected predecessor in American thought," Orestes Brownson. Brownson was a widely learned and deeply earnest conservative democrat of the nineteenth century, who (like Kirk) "settled in Michigan, and ended up a Roman Catholic and a traditionalist."¹

Brownson was also a disciple of John C. Calhoun, an advocate of federalism, and a defender in the North of the Southern people both before and after the War between the States. Brownson's twenty volumes of collected works reflect a lifelong engagement in defense in the public order of Christianity, tradition, and genuine social justice. His likeness to Kirk is indeed compelling in every respect, not the least in that these two men of letters from the Deep North appreciated the necessity of encompassing the South in any persuasive and viable traditionalist vision of American society.

Privately, Bradford liked to tell the story of how his Vanderbilt mentor, the poet and unreconstructed Southern Agrarian Donald Davidson, had met the young man Kirk some time in the early fifties before Kirk had burst on the scene with the first edition of *The Conservative Mind*. "Dr.

Don" instructed Bradford that Kirk was a man whose friendship and collaboration were to be cherished—and so they were for three decades.

Davidson's admiration for Kirk was reciprocated. In a late piece Kirk wrote:

Browsing in 1939 in the library at Michigan State College, an earnest sophomore, I happened upon a new book...entitled *The Attack on Leviathan*, and subtitled *Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States*. It was written eloquently, and for me it made coherent the misgivings I had felt concerning the political notions popular in the 1930s. The book was so good that I assumed all intelligent Americans were reading it.²

Only later did Kirk learn that Davidson's book had been ignored by the intelligentsia and pulped by its publisher not long after it appeared. Many years after, Kirk put *The Attack on Leviathan* on his list of the ten most important conservative books, along with Burke, Adams, Brownson, Tocqueville, Roepke, Eliot, and others. And he saw to its republication in his Library of Conservative Thought. "Both before and after the Civil War," Kirk wrote in drawing up his list of ten, "half the important conservative books of America have been written in the

Clyde N. Wilson is professor of history at the University of South Carolina, editor of *The Papers of John C. Calhoun* and a number of other books, most recently *The Essential Calhoun* in Russell Kirk's Library of Conservative Thought (Transaction Publishers).

South."³ He might have added that many if not all of the Northern conservatives he celebrated in *The Conservative Mind*, like Cooper, Melville, and Brownson, had a Southern tinge and Southern sympathies.

In his characteristically charming style, which eschewed the journalistic, polemical, and pedantic, and hearkened back more than any other writer of our time to the graceful, gentlemanly communication of eighteenth century Britain, Kirk observed, in another late piece:

More than sixty years ago, when I was a fourth-grader in the very northern town of Plymouth, Michigan, twelve Southerners published a book entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. That same volume, a heartfelt defense of the permanent things in the South's culture, has been discussed ever since.... Young men and women who come to study with me in my northern fastness discover this literature—even without my having commented on any of it—and read the books, night upon night, even to the witching hour of three.⁴

On many other occasions Kirk praised the Southern Agrarians, who he likened to the "Celts of the Twilight," going often to battle but seldom to victory. "The authors of *I'll Take My Stand* did not propound a rigorous ideology or display a model of Utopia; the principle purpose it was to open eyes to the illusions of Modernism." Their position was "not the only mode of conservative thought, but it is an important mode."⁵

The aims that Kirk correctly ascribed to the Southern writers were, of course, his own; and the same is true of their disciple Richard Weaver and of every other twentieth-century thinker worthy to wear the colors of traditionalist. They were engaged in a common struggle—a fight, as Bradford put it, against "discontinuity, rupture, and drastic innovation."⁶ That is to say, they stood against that strong current of Americanism

that regards our country as a notion, an unfinished infinitely malleable proposition for progress and democracy.

America was, rather, though a new land in the wilderness, a fabric of culture stretching back to Jerusalem, Rome, Athens, and London. Which is, of course, self-evidently true and yet ignored in most of our public discourse, including the words of many who fancy themselves "conservatives." As Bradford described it in his essay on Kirk's achievements: "Kirk's amiable but unremitting determination is to require of our generation a grudging admission that America has a religious, a moral, and therefore a political genealogy; a patrimony that could be called unrevolutionary and not at all modern...."⁷

Russell Kirk was invariably "amiable," as Bradford put it, as well as eclectic and generous. His conservatism was never an ideology but a wide net that captured all who gave allegiance to "the permanent things." ("The permanent things" and the "moral imagination" were two of Kirk's favorite phrases.) Only very rarely was he provoked into a mild irritation with those he felt were not true defenders of the permanent things, such as libertarians and neo-conservatives.

Thus, while Kirk did not like to emphasize differences, being a student of history he understood perfectly well tensions and incompatibilities between different ways of being conservative. The incompatibility, for instance, between the tradition represented by Randolph, and Calhoun, and Brownson, on the one hand, and that of Alexander Hamilton, on the other hand, that dubious conservative who "fascinates those numerous Americans among whom the acquisitive instinct is confounded with the conservative tendency."⁸ This Kirk, in *The Conservative Mind*, put very gently, but it is clear which side he was on in the division that runs all through American history and makes even today a gulf dividing those who

Kirk was a
laboration
were for

k was re-
rote:

Michigan
I hap-
e Attack
ism and
written
rent the
political
k was so
nericans

avidson's
lligentsia
ng after it
put *The*
of the ten
ks, along
cqueville,
saw to its
conserva-
after the
up his list
servative
ten in the

the Univer-
rs of John C.
ost recently
Library of
blishers).

call themselves "conservatives."

Irving L. Horowitz, Kirk's publisher in recent times, in a moving and very insightful memorial tribute, commented that "for Russell, what ought to be is at least as important as what is in the conduct of human affairs." And, "he understood that our world was comprised, if not shrouded, in mystery and paradox; and hence in need of dispositions and not dogmas."⁹ This is quite far from that often prevailing progressive and pragmatic side of the American spirit, which prefers results to mysteries.

Horowitz describes in his reference to "disposition" what was one of Kirk's main themes always: the moral imagination, that Western man at his best reflected and was guided by spiritual apprehensions and historical wisdom, not by the abstractions of social improvers and their little pamphlets and party platforms. This is the chief lesson Kirk drew from Burke and Kirk's chief legacy to us. "Moral" because only in such a full mythopoeic role can man, made in the image of God and not merely a culture-bearing animal, fulfill his real ethical nature. "Imagination" because the employment of that faculty leads to understandings liberated from the material and animal and because most of the really important wisdom of the race is preserved in imaginative and not rationalistic form.

Patrick Buchanan, in his tribute to Kirk, put the same lesson in slightly different words. He summarized Kirk's primary message as the truth that ideology, the curse of our sad century, is merely a sham religion that takes possession of a soul that is empty. Whether it is fascism, Marxism, democratic capitalism, "the end of history," or any other secular utopia.¹⁰

This rejection of ideology is a mode of thinking, and living, that Kirk shared with the Southern Agrarians and with the subject of his first book, *Randolph of Roanoke*:

A Study in Conservative Thought (1951). For many years I have asked persons at various conservative gatherings what books have most influenced their thinking. A surprisingly large number, over three decades or more, have pointed to Kirk's *Randolph*, more than have mentioned *The Conservative Mind*.

That a conservative of Kirk's stamp should value the South should not shock anyone. It was, after all, Randolph, the quintessentially Southern statesman, who said: "I love liberty and hate equality," thus summing up the American traditionalist's creed as well



Randolph of Roanoke was the subject of Russell Kirk's first book.

as it has ever been done. Where else in America than the South could Kirk find substantial and continuing traditions to oppose egalitarianism and utilitarianism, to affirm the American link with British culture and a propertied order, a preference for local liberties and prescriptive rights, and a distaste for abstract schemes and rationalistic progress?

For in fact, as Kirk recognized in the

Thought (1951).
sked persons at
ings what books
thinking. A sur-
er three decades
Kirk's *Randolph*,
d *The Conserva-*

k's stamp should
shock anyone. It
quintessentially
said: "I love lib-
us summing up
t's creed as well



is the subject
st book.

Where else in
ould Kirk find
g traditions to
utilitarianism,
nk with British
ler, a preference
scriptive rights,
t schemes and
ognized in the

section of *The Conservative Mind* which he entitled "Southern Valor," the South, for reasons historians have long contended about, has retained more firmly than elsewhere a kind of primal, telluric connection with the tradition of Old Western Man, both self-consciously in political revolt and unconsciously in its folk fabric. All of which is evidenced clearly by the statistics on Christian orthodoxy, personal and local loyalty, and willingness to fight. (Since this is providential it can be a source of satisfaction but not of self-satisfaction for Southerners.) What Kirk called "Southern Valor" and what Richard Weaver described as the "older religiousness of the South" is simply Burke's "the cheap defense of nations," "the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise," and "unbought grace of life." (This is also the reason, to quote a title by Davidson, "Why the Modern South Has a Great Literature.")

Kirk's Southern alliance is not surprising then, any more than was Brownson's. Nevertheless, at the time he published *Randolph of Roanoke* it was daring to choose as his exemplary American conservative and Burkean the most intransigently Southern of all American statesmen. This Kirk well realized, because he addressed that very matter in the book's opening passage. What relevance could the ideas of the eccentric Randolph have for postwar America?

America, which presently finds herself the chief protector of the traditions of Western society and therefore a conservative nation, has suffered from a paucity of men of conservative intellect. She needs to re-examine her first principles, if she is to withstand the social atomization which most of the world is experiencing.¹¹

Here Kirk was not only explaining his attention to Randolph of Roanoke, but describing his own life's work, which was then at its beginning. And the words are perhaps truer now, getting nigh on half a century after

they were written, than ever before.

In response to this felt need of the early 1950s, Kirk pointed out that Calhoun was at last receiving the attention he deserved, which indeed he was, from conservative and moderate scholars like Peter Drucker, Margaret Coit, Clinton Rossiter, Felix Morley, and others. The study of Randolph was even more justified then; his thought "was an appeal to tradition, and against the god Whirl, and it has its disciples yet."¹²

At this date, when we take for granted the learning that Kirk, Weaver, Bradford, and others have made conventional in regard to the Southern aspect of American conservatism, it is easy to forget how bold was Kirk's strategy. The received wisdom of American conservatism, such as it was at that time of its intellectual nadir, followed Henry Adams's nasty writings in which Randolph was presented as a crazed genius, "the sable arm of the South." The South was regarded, and nowhere more so than among the acquisitive Hamiltonian conservatives, as the most radical and, indeed, evil part of America, least of all a repository of essential values. When it was not ignored entirely.

In a chapter called "Change Is Not Reform," Kirk felt compelled to argue down the prejudice that Randolph was not a statesman at all. For too many Americans, a statesman was not he who preserved the ancient constitution, shaping when necessary, but he who hacked it down to clear the ground for ever newer and grander constructions. Wrote Kirk:

Truly conservative statesmen—leaders whose chief desire is the preservation of the ancient values of society—have been rare here; often men called conservatives have been eager for alteration of a nature calculated to encourage a very different kind of society—Hamilton most conspicuous among them. Professed devotion to the cause of undefined progress and innovation has been virtually a prerequisite for political advancement....¹³

In this Kirk was strictly in the tradition of Southern politics.

Like the Founding Fathers and the Southern writers he admired, Russell Kirk was a genuine man of letters, effortlessly combining the wisdom of history and literature with the needs of the daily world—a rare thing in our time of journalism and “social science.” The man of letters, though broadly learned and capable of a scholarly exposition or a philosophical argument, is not a pedant. Able to turn out a craftsman-like story or poem, yet he is not a self-conscious artist. Willing, if the times are so disjointed as to demand it, to pen a scathing political polemic, he definitely is not an ideologue.

American culture and public life are in a perilously low state, but how much worse off we would be if it had not been for Russell Kirk and his valorous life in behalf of the moral imagination that is the essence of our civilization. We have no better example of resourceful defense of unchanging principle, through bad times and worse.¹⁴

Notes

1. “A Proper Patrimony: Russell Kirk and America’s Moral Genealogy,” in M.E. Bradford, *A Better Guide than Reason: Studies in the American Revolution* (LaSalle, IL: Sherwood Sugden, 1979), p. 215. It was

first published in *The Intercollegiate Review*, vol. 12 no.1, fall 1976.

2. “Donald Davidson and the South’s Conservatism,” in Russell Kirk’s *The Politics of Prudence* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1993), pp. 99-100.

3. “Ten Conservative Books,” in *The Politics of Prudence*, p. 54.

4. *The Politics of Prudence*, p. 107.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

6. *A Better Guide*, p. 208.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

8. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind, From Burke to Eliot*, 4th revised edition (New York: Avon Books, 1968), p. 80.

9. Irving Louis Horowitz, “Remarks Delivered at a Memorial Service for Russell Kirk at St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, Washington, D.C.” Typescript, pp. 1-2.

10. Patrick J. Buchanan, “Russell Kirk: Giant of American Conservatism,” in *Putting America First*, vol.1. no.5 (June 1994): 2.

11. Russell Kirk, *Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in Conservative Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 1-2.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

14. *Crisis: A Journal of Lay Catholic Opinion* in its October 1993 issue (vol. 11, no. 9) has published five substantial essays on Kirk’s career and contributions.

From the ISI Bookshelf

EDUCATION IN A FREE SOCIETY

EDITED BY ANNE HUSTED BURLEIGH

Russell Kirk, Stephen Tonsor, Pierre Goodrich, Dorothy Sayers, and others outline the ideal educational arrangement for a society of free and responsible persons. (Cloth, 263 pp., List: \$7.00, ISI: \$4.00)

LITERATURE AND THE AMERICAN COLLEGE

BY IRVING BABBITT

This classic work, containing a major introduction by Russell Kirk, explains why the humane disciplines are important to the person and the republic. It offers the cement to make one’s educational experience cohere. (Cloth, 208 pp., List: \$25.00, ISI: \$8.00)

To order call 1-800-526-7022 or use the form on page 95.