

John Shelton Reed

A Creative Engagement

The Devil Knows Latin: Why America Needs the Classical Tradition
by E. Christian Kopff. ISI Books, Wilmington, DE, 1999.

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Collections of topically diverse essays are notoriously difficult to review. The temptation is to comment on each piece seriatim, providing a sort of annotated table of contents, but that can be tedious for both reviewer and reader. Yet if what’s missing in the way of topical unity is made up for, as it is here, by a unity of approach or perspective the task of saying something about the ensemble is easier. These essays deal with topics ranging from the postmodern blight in the humanities to the

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And it’s worth watching. One of Kopff’s heroes (and mine) is Albert J. Nock, of whom Edmund Optiz has said that his “ideas were perhaps not so original as he was, but he had made them his very own; his thinking ran along lines quite at variance with the familiar channels scooped out by...popular pundits.”

The same could be said of Kopff. Certainly a self-identified conservative whose enemies list includes not just Crevecoeur, FDR, and Michel Foucault but Adam Smith and the New Critics is not one easily mapped onto the terrain of contemporary politics. Moreover, whether discussing American teachers’ need for a strong dose of the classics (and not in translation either) or the need to repeal the Fourteenth Amendment, Kopff displays a fine indifference to what less imaginative folks might call practical-

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More importantly, though, he has things to say that cannot be said too often. In particular, he calls for "the recognition that tradition is a fruitful thing, not a lifeless, dry assortment of historical detritus." And he means by tradition not only "the Great Tradition with which we must never lose touch" but also "the little traditions we love and are meant to love, though in the end we shall see them disappear, like the old Episcopal Prayer Book, celebrating Washington's birthday, or wishing one another a 'Merry Christmas.'"

The book is divided into three parts (yes, like Gaul) and this theme is most explicit in the first, "Civilization as Narrative," which addresses such topics as the influence of Latin on English, the traditional liberal arts curriculum, and the consequences of letting economists think for us. These essays offer not only fascinating snippets of knowledge (e.g., that each of the United States has two Senators "out of deference to the Amphictyonic Council of Ancient Delphi") but provocative observations like this one:

It is hard for Americans today to accept the idea that having a creative and progressive culture means participating in demanding traditions thousands of years old. We want to believe that we did it our way. Just as we walk through our supermarkets, filing past aisle after aisle of breakfast cereals and toothpastes and choose what catches our fancy, so we want to select off the shelf our lifestyles, our families, our religions, our value systems. . . . Getting cultured in America today is, for many, essentially another form of promiscuity.

"The Good, the Bad, and the Post-modern," the book's middle section, includes among other things a tribute to J. R. R. Tolkien, deprecations of Paul de Man and the British philosopher Bernard Williams, and balanced assessments of Kopff's fellow classicists A. E. Housman, James G. Frazer, and Gilbert Murray. To my mind, the most interesting of these pieces is the least predictable: a sympathetic treatment of the nineteenth-century Boston blue-stocking Margaret Fuller. What I thought I knew of Fuller I didn't like, but Kopff's essay sent me to the library to learn more about this remarkable woman.

The last section, "Contemporary Chronicles: Role Models and Popular Culture," begins with appreciations of Russell Kirk and of Kopff's teacher, the classicist and Scottish nationalist Douglas Young (which could as easily have gone in the previous section), but it ends with several examples of Kopff's film criticism. These are perhaps the book's most unexpected delight—surely no author has ever before begun with a story from G. K. Chesterton and wound up quoting Woody Allen—and they are full of startling, dead-on insight, like the observation that "no other people has taken policemen for their heroes, as we have and still do," or that Leone's "later, critically acclaimed movies...resemble nothing so much as expensive imitations of Leone by someone who has studied Sergio Leone movies but cannot understand what made them work," or that, "like Aeneas, [Eastwood's heroes] have been stripped of family and city in order to lead others to a new home and a new community." "Still in Saigon in My Mind," an essay on Viet Nam movies, is one of Kopff's best: I came away from it and the others here with a list of enough movies to watch (or to rewatch with a new perspective) to keep me busy for a very long time. I may start with *The Lion King* to see if any good thing can

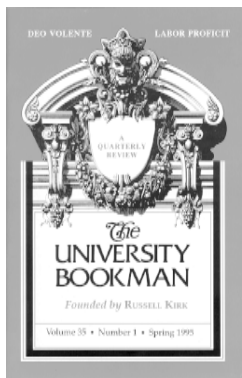
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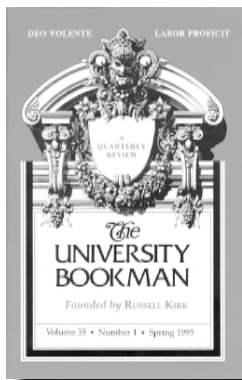
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