The New Criterion

Features January 2019

Permanent Things: Russell Kirk's centenary

by *Roger Kimball*

An introduction to The New Criterion's 2018 symposium on Russell Kirk.

In essence, the body of belief we call "conservatism" is an affirmation of normality in the concerns of society.
—Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*

Mark the uncanny hand of coincidence. When I began thinking about putting together a conference about the legacy of Russell Kirk last spring, I knew that we were in the middle of his centenary. We wanted to take advantage of that milestone, so we determined to hold the conference sometime in the autumn. After various deliberations and inspections of the calendar and other obligations, we settled, as if by accident, on October 19. I had no idea, when we proffered our invitations to the participants, that October 19 happened to be Kirk's birthday.1

In his charming book about coincidences, Father George Rutler notes that "odious" though "the superstitious misuse of coincidence is," that perversion is "only slightly less offensive [than] the underestimation of the significance of some" coincidences. The serendipity, if not the capital-P Providence, of the date of our discussion of Russell Kirk seemed appropriate for a sage who was so conspicuously attuned to the eldritch, the inexplicable, the uncanny. After all, Kirk has always been one of those figures whose example is an admonition against the ontological poverty with which we saddle ourselves in our surrender to the beguiling superficialities of a thoroughly disenchanted secular materialism.

It was no accident, as the Marxists like to say, that Kirk's biggest sales by far were in the demotic realm of ghost stories, a subject that James Panero deftly explores below. If ghosts and other non-quotidian manifestations loom large in Russell Kirk's spiritual geography, it is partly because he was not beholden to the exiguous dogmas of a self-declared age of enlightenment whose defining prejudice is, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's phrase, a prejudice against prejudice.

Indeed, one of Kirk's chief attractions is the amplitude of his worldview. He did not quite approve of Walt Whitman. But there was a largeness about Kirk's view of the universe that was Whitmanian in its insouciance regarding logical niceties, which can seem sterile when

counterpoised against the rude pulse of living tradition. I do not say that Kirk, as Whitman boasted, contradicted himself. But he assuredly "contained multitudes." Regarding ghosts, I believe that Kirk would have appreciated, with a twinkle, what Margot Asquith said. Asked whether she believed in ghosts, the elegant wife of the Prime Minister replied that "appearances are in their favor."

Kirk, in short, was a thinker who coaxed us to enlarge, not diminish, the existential furniture of our world. Catholic churches in this country have lately taken to ending the Mass with a prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel. Protect us in battle, we say, be our safeguard against the *nequitiam et insidias diaboli*, the wickedness and snares of the devil. Are those just words? Airy nothings gilded with a crust of sentiment, or sentimentality? Or are we talking about real things, *Satanam aliosque spiritus malignos*?

Hold that thought.

In Henry IV Part 1, Sir John Falstaff, a thoroughly modern rogue, asks, "What is honor?" and concludes, not without a bitter dram of contempt, that honor is but a word. And what, he asks, "is in that word 'honor'? What is that 'honor'? Air. A trim reckoning," he says, "a mere scutcheon."

Russell Kirk's life was a campaign against this species of existential depreciation. For him, honor was a reality, not "air," not nothing, and I suspect his pantheon of realities had plenty of room for angels as well.

The philosopher Roger Scruton once observed that Kirk showed that conservatism is fundamentally not an economic but a cultural outlook, and that conservatism "would have no future if reduced merely to the philosophy of profit. Put bluntly," Scruton said, "conservatism is not about profit but about loss: it survives and flourishes because people are in the habit of mourning their losses, and resolving to safeguard against them."

Bill Buckley is often credited with rescuing conservatism from political irrelevance and social ostracism. Buckley's force of personality, his languid if also bright-eyed and energetic demeanor, almost single-handedly injected life into the conservative project at a moment when the pieties of a regnant liberalism were nearly ubiquitous and, therefore, taken for granted.

But if Bill Buckley reenergized the political and social fortunes of conservatism, Kirk was the person most responsible for reinvigorating the intellectual heritage of conservatism in this country. Kirk, who died in 1994 at seventy-five, was a lonely voice in the wilderness when, in 1953, he published his magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind* (two years before the inaugural issue of *National Review*).

Only a few years before, in 1950, the literary critic Lionel Trilling famously wrote that "in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation." He explained, "the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not,

with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas."

In a single stroke, Kirk's book challenged that diagnosis. Kirk had set out to write a kind of elegy, commemorating a great but derelict past. In the event, *The Conservative Mind* not only recovered a neglected legacy of conservative ideas, but also trumpeted a conservative future. The edition I first read, back in the 1990s, was a seventh revised edition: who knows how many printings the book has been through by now?

From the moment it appeared, the book was a sensation. I still recall the thrill it gave me. "At last," I thought, "I have come home." Describing "an inclination to cherish the permanent things in human existence," Kirk issued a challenge to liberal pieties and provided a tonic for conservative thinkers and politicians.

John Stuart Mill had once referred to conservatives as "the stupid party." Kirk's book helped restore conservatism's patent of intellectual respectability. A brief introduction outlines the six touchstones of Kirk's conservative vision: "belief in a transcendent order"; "affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence"; a commitment to ordered liberty; a recognition that "freedom and property are closely linked"; faith in prescription against the putative expertise of the "sophisters, calculators, and economists" that Burke memorably anathematized in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*; and the understanding that change is not synonymous with betterment. (Kirk would have liked Lord Falkland's observation that "when it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change.")

From the moment it appeared, the book was a sensation. I still recall the thrill it gave me. "At last," I thought, "I have come home."

Over the succeeding five hundred pages, Kirk artfully develops these themes through an analysis of the work of various conservative thinkers and movements. He begins with Edmund Burke, the *genius loci* of Kirk's philosophical outlook, moves through John Adams and the American Founders, the English Romantics (mostly good) and Utilitarians (suspect), Southern conservatives like John Randolph and John Calhoun, and on through the conservative pantheon and its liberal antiphony. Kirk ponders Tocqueville, Macaulay, Disraeli, Newman, Mill, James Fitzjames Stephen, George Santayana, Irving Babbit, and T. S. Eliot, among others. It is a bravura performance, based on extensive reading but too engaged and passionate to be described as "scholarly." *The Conservative Mind* is a book that examines tradition in order to reanimate and inhabit that tradition. It is an inquiry in search of a credo, not a bid for tenure.

Headquartered for most of his prolific career at Piety Hill, his family's modest ancestral home in Mecosta, Michigan, Kirk wrote some thirty books—novels and those hot-selling ghost stories along with works of intellectual history—as well as countless magazine articles and

lectures. His influence was enormous. He was, for example, an important part of the founding generation of Buckley's National Review. He was a friend of politicians from Barry Goldwater through Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan. But Kirk's place in cultural history is as difficult to categorize as was the man himself.

Kirk left behind two memoirs, *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory* and *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict*, a book he completed shortly before his death. Like Caesar's chronicle of his exploits in Gaul, *The Sword of Imagination* is written in the third person, which gives the book a formal, almost stately, texture. Nevertheless, the book provides a vivid portrait of a life devoted to salvaging traditional—even antique—values in a world increasingly ruled by technological and economic imperatives. "There are no lost causes," Kirk observed, quoting a favorite *mot* from T. S. Eliot, "because there are no gained causes." Our sloth, our lethargy, in the face of the fragile dispensations we take for settled realities, tends to obscure that dialectic of loss and gain.

Among those who were likely to be vexed by his meditations, Kirk notes, are "enthusiasts for modernity, the global village, the end of history, the gross national product, emancipation from moral inhibitions, abstract rights without concomitant duties, and what Samuel Johnson called 'the lust for innovation.' " It was part of Kirk's charm to enroll modernity (what Walter Lippmann anathematized, as Daniel Mahoney shows below, as "the acids of modernity") and the gnp in his catalogue of vices and to cast "innovation," and *a fortiori* the *lust* for innovation, into his index of suspect attitudes.

Kirk was fond of quoting H. Stuart Hughes's observation that "conservatism is the negation of ideology." His own brand of conservatism admitted principles but regarded "positions" and "dogmata" (a nice Greek plural that was one of his favorite epithets) with hostility. He blended a nostalgic romanticism with a Burkean faith in the advantages of tradition and "sound prejudice." It was from Kirk, I believe, that I first absorbed Burke's idea that prejudice is not, as we have been taught *ad nauseam*, synonymous with bigotry, but, on the contrary, that "a just prejudice"—a "prejudging" based on convention, custom, and tradition is a good thing because it renders a man's "virtue his habit," a nugget of wisdom whose lineage goes back to Aristotle's teachings about prudence and habit in the *Nicomachean Ethics.*

Kirk was almost Chestertonian in his fondness for paradox.

Kirk was almost Chestertonian in his fondness for paradox. One of my favorite Kirkian observations is that he was a conservative *because* he was a liberal. What goes under the banner of "liberalism" today has so thoroughly cut itself off from such traditional animating liberal imperatives as free speech, disinterested inquiry, and advancement according to merit that it is easy to regard Kirk's declaration as merely paradoxical. But it was not paradoxical so much as it was admonitory, recalling us to springs of freedom that only an embrace of tradition can nourish. Like Burke, Kirk

understood that an affirmation of the customary and conventional is the most reliable safeguard for individuality and fructifying idiosyncrasy.

Edmund Burke is a respectable conservative icon, and Kirk did a great deal to reintroduce Burke to an American audience innocent of his work in *The Conservative Mind* and his 1967 book *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered.* As an ambassador from the territory of bygone ideas and sentiments, Kirk can seem like a respectable conservative icon himself. In some ways he was. But we do him a disservice, I think, if we insist on making him too respectable. If he was a "Tory," he was also, as he put it, a "Bohemian" Tory. He was correct in observing that his was not an "Enlightenment mind" but a "Gothic mind, medieval in its temper and structure." Those ghosts, that suspicion of modernity and its heralds, "calculators and economists."

This feature of Kirk's temperament made for some striking, not to say eccentric, conjunctions. Like other conservatives, Kirk affirmed that "freedom and property are closely linked." But what he said of Wilhelm Roepke was also true of himself; Kirk was "no apologist for an abstract 'capitalism.' " He was no doctrinaire disciple of Friedrich Hayek or Milton Friedman, and he frequently inveighed against "our fetishes of creature comforts and material aggrandizement." Kirk rarely used the word "Progress" without a sarcastic initial capital.

The automobile, he wrote—and he always wrote "automobile," not "car"—was a "mechanical Jacobin," an "instrument of civic and familial undoing," different from the guillotine, he implied, chiefly because it lacked a sharpened blade. In his view, "industrialism was a harder knock to conservatism than the books of the French equalitarians."

Although Kirk was a friend and avid supporter of Ronald Reagan, he had nevertheless voted for the socialist Norman Thomas in 1944 to "reward" him for his anti-imperialist stand before Pearl Harbor. Later, in 1976, he lodged another protest, voting for Eugene McCarthy. Although he was a fervent patriot, Kirk believed that all the wars fought by America, the Revolutionary War included, "might have been averted." I do not think he would have been pleased by a Secretary of Defense whose nickname is "Mad Dog." At the same time, Kirk was no isolationist. As Daniel McCarthy observes in his essay below, "Kirk was not a defeatist, a quietist, or a reactionary alienated from his country and its political struggles. He was a conservative in full, who gave priority to faith and culture while nonetheless embracing politics as necessary and, within proper limits, good."

Kirk did not hesitate to enunciate forbidden opinions: "There ought to be inequality of condition in the world," he wrote. "For without inequality, there is no class; without class, no manners and no beauty; and then people sink into public and private ugliness." Fortunately, Kirk was not running for office or looking for a position in an American university.

Generally, Kirk's boldness was refreshing. Occasionally, though, he trespassed into crankishness. In 1988, for example, he wrote that "not seldom has it seemed as if some eminent Neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States." In my view, that judgment bespoke not a current of anti-Semitism, of which he was accused at the time, but rather was an extension of his

commitment to local filiation and the integrity of national allegiance.

Although Kirk came late to religious belief—he was not received into the Catholic Church until 1964—he always believed that "political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems." The very first of his six "canons" of conservatism, remember, was the conviction that there exists a "transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience." He would have agreed with Irving Kristol that "All people, everywhere, at all times, are 'theotropic' beings, who cannot long abide the absence of a transcendental dimension to their lives." It is a Burkean point. "Man," said Burke, "is by his constitution a religious animal." Consequently, as Kirk wrote in a reflection on T. S. Eliot, "When religious faith decays, culture must decline, though often seeming to flourish for a space after the religion which has nourished it has sunk into disbelief . . . no cultured person should remain indifferent to erosion of apprehension of the transcendent." Kirk's life and work was a testament to that conviction, and I suspect that it may be his most precious legacy to this technology-besotted world. Kirk wielded his sword of imagination not so much to influence policy but, as he said, "to rouse the political and moral imagination among the shapers of public opinion." Few will agree with all of Kirk's opinions. But all conservatives must be grateful to him for recalling us to values that are as precious as they are besieged.

---

1 "Permanent Things: Russell Kirk's Centenary," a symposium organized by *The New Criterion*, took place on October 19, 2018, in New York City. Participants were Brian C. Anderson, T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr., Mark Henrie, Roger Kimball, Daniel J. Mahoney, Daniel McCarthy, Jeffrey O. Nelson, James Panero, James Piereson, Jeffrey Polet, R. R. Reno, and Gerald Russello. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the essays presented in this special section.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from* The New Criterion *at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 37 Number 5 , on page 4

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/1/permanent-things-russell-kirks-centenary