
Bradley Birzer and the Kirk Revival

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Russell Kirk: American Conservative, by Bradley J. Birzer. *Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2015. 574 pp. \$34.95.*

Russell Kirk was one of the most important figures in twentieth-century American intellectual, cultural, and political life, and he has been the subject of a number of books. The most recent is a most impressive study by Bradley Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*. It has had a deservedly grand reception, including the Paolucci Book Award from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute and many favorable reviews not only in academic journals but in such mass-circulation publications as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*.

Professor Birzer's book represents a major advance in Kirk scholarship and invites comparisons with earlier studies of Kirk. It more fully and successfully than any of the others conveys the scope, meaning, and magnitude of Kirk's accomplishment. One of Birzer's many strengths

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is his truly amazing command of the primary sources. His archival labors are those of an outstanding scholar and historian. What commands even more respect is his capacity for organizing and interpreting a vast amount of material and discerning the significance of particular pieces of evidence. Birzer remedies a number of common and sometimes serious inadequacies of earlier studies that interpret and assess Kirk as a thinker and a person.¹

The Birzer volume follows the publication of four other major Kirk studies, which suggests the vitality and breadth of Kirk scholarship. The first systematic study of Kirk to appear was James Person's highly

¹ For an example of thoughtful recently published scholarship on Kirk that does not suffer from obvious inadequacy, see James McClellan, "Russell Kirk's Anglo-American Conservatism," in *History of American Political Thought*, ed. Frost and Sikkenga (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003).

accessible and readable introduction to the life and works of the “Duke of Mecosta,” *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind*.² Person provides a coherent and convincing analysis of Kirk’s thought and its enduring significance for American politics and humane learning. Originally published in 1999 and reprinted in 2016 (without revision), it remains an excellent source. Person wants to introduce a new generation of readers to “one of the greatest minds this nation has produced during the twentieth century” (xi).³ Kirk’s achievements are organized into four sections. The first section interprets Kirk’s background, his historical consciousness, and his views on education and constitutionalism. The second section deals with Kirk’s devotion to the importance of literature and his social criticism. The third and fourth sections survey Kirk’s thought on economics and assess his lasting importance as a political thinker. The greatest contribution of this volume is its discussion of Kirk’s defense of a social order grounded in justice and the diffusion of political power.

Person’s biography of Kirk is for the general reader. It elucidates the life and work of Kirk while avoiding the seemingly arcane controversies and personages that often dominate academic discussion. John M.

² James E. Person, Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1999; repr. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

³ All textual citations related to the Person volume are from the 2016 edition.

Pafford’s *Russell Kirk*, a volume in Bloomsbury’s “Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers” that was published in 2013, is in a similar vein. It provides a clear and sympathetic account of Kirk’s thought and its continued importance.⁴

The first more truly academic treatise on Kirk and the first to attempt a more philosophical analysis and assessment of his central ideas was Wesley McDonald’s *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*.⁵ To bring out what seems central and most characteristic about Kirks’s thought, its stress on “the moral imagination” as an anti-dote to ideology and other ahistorical abstraction, McDonald uses an interpretive framework derived from Irving Babbitt and Edmund Burke. The decisive influence of Babbitt on Kirk, which has been fully acknowledged by Kirk, should not be minimized, but the particular emphasis of McDonald’s study may, however inadvertently, have made Kirk look less wide-ranging, original, and independent than he was, an impression to which other Kirk scholars have also on occasion contributed.

Literature and humane letters were an even greater influence upon Kirk than McDonald suggests. Contrary to the claim that the role of literature became really important to Kirk in midlife, it was central to him as early as the 1940s: witness,

⁴ (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵ (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004). See <http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2014/09/remembering-w-wesley-mcdonald-marylander.html>.

for example, Kirk's early writings on tragedy (1940), George Gissing (1950), and Sir Walter Scott (1952).

To his great credit, McDonald encompasses all of Kirk's extensive corpus and provides a penetrating reading, explication, and analysis of the ideas that hold it together. Specifically, McDonald's exegesis of Kirk's *Enemies of the Permanent Things* should encourage renewed interest in a work that outlines many of Kirk's most important themes.⁶

McDonald brilliantly articulates Kirk's use of history as an intellectual tool. McDonald's examination of the errors of Leo Strauss's view of Burke, especially in *Natural Right and History*, as contrasted with Kirk's view of Burke, is also groundbreaking. Kirk often noted that Strauss reconsidered his original assessment of Burke. According to Kirk, Strauss made such comments to him while Kirk was a guest lecturer under the auspices of Strauss at the University of Chicago. Strauss had moderated his earlier criticism of Burke and become more receptive to Kirk's interpretation.⁷ The more precise contours of this dialogue and related issues remain opaque, but continue to receive attention from disciples of Strauss as well as from Burke scholars.⁸

Finally, McDonald's discussion of Kirk's view of technology is a seminal contribution to our understanding of Kirk as a critic of con-

temporary culture.⁹

Gerald Russello's *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* attempts to adapt Kirk's insights to the twenty-first century. He examines five aspects of his work: its overall purpose; its interpretation of history; its view of political life; its jurisprudence; and its criticism of modern life (Kirk's "counternarrative").¹⁰ Kirk's interest in and often active personal engagement with social life and politics is detailed, and those who have neglected this aspect of his life and work—viewing Kirk as either an advocate of "nostalgia" or as having a "static version of some ideal past"—are introduced to the more practical and contemporary potentialities of his legacy. The vital importance of tradition and history for acting in the present are explored with clarity and sensitivity along with Kirk's views of politics and statesmanship. Russello's treatment of the connection between natural law and American constitutionalism in Kirk's writings also deserves a commendation. Most generally and importantly, Russello provides a sagacious refutation of often unreflective criticisms of Kirk while affirming the vitality and relevance of his thought for addressing the

⁶ (La Salle, Illinois: Sherwood Sugden, 1984).

⁷ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (Peru, Illinois: Sherwood Sugden, 1988), p. 185.

⁸ See Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 190.

⁹ Consider here also Kirk's "Humane Learning in the Age of the Computer," in *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things are Written on the Sky* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1987), 90-100; republished in *Redeeming the Time* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1996). Kirk's response to the critical reviews of *Wise Men* provides additional commentary.

¹⁰ (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007).

needs of contemporary politics.

These books about Kirk range from highly useful and enlightening to outstanding, but Birzer's large and encyclopedic study of the Duke of Mecosta surpasses them in most respects, not least by being so comprehensive and many-faceted. It is a masterwork, worthy of what is arguably the greatest figure in post-World-War-II conservatism. Birzer manages to convey the great scope and depth of Russell Kirk as a political thinker, cultural critic, historian, political theorist, and journalist, but also covers Kirk's many other and often significant activities. Birzer firmly establishes what others have also indicated, that Kirk's significance is not limited to what has been called "the conservative movement," not even to "conservatism" broadly construed. While he identified himself as a conservative, he was a man of broad humane learning who transcended facile categories and groupings. He engaged a wide variety of political and intellectual movements as well as individuals across a broad range of views whom he personally encountered.

Birzer's book is very thorough and nearly flawless. The first chapter, entitled "Desert Humanist," offers a very useful survey of Kirk's early life and an examination of Kirk's emerging plea for a return to traditional notions of political order and power. Kirk's narrative covers Kirk's early academic experiences, especially at Duke as a graduate student under the influence of his two mentors, Jay Hubbell (English) and Charles Syd-

nor (history). It is unfortunate that Hubbell is not mentioned in the text. He was a major influence upon the young Kirk in all matters literary.

Birzer appropriately spends a great deal of time on the development of Kirk's defense of the moral basis of social and political life. Yet there are two problems with Birzer's account: He attributes too much significance to Roman Catholicism as an influence on Kirk; and he makes Kirk more libertarian than he was even in his youth. Kirk was essentially a Christian ecumenist. It was long after his central ideas had formed and when he courted his future wife, who was Catholic, that he would make his way to Rome. Of Kirk's four greatest clerical friends, Canon Basil Alec Smith, Rev. Dr. Lynn Harold Hough, Canon Bernard Iddings Bell, and Father Martin D'Arcy, S. J., only one was a Roman Catholic. Significantly, all four were major advocates of ecumenism, properly understood—Smith as a man of letters and leading Anglican clergyman, Hough as the Dean of the Drew Divinity School, Bell as a leading cleric and President of what is now Bard College, and D'Arcy as an internationally respected intellectual.¹¹ Also of importance when

¹¹ Birzer does not integrate Father D'Arcy into his larger Kirkian narrative, but is appreciative of his contribution to scholarship and Catholic social and political thought. See Bradley J. Birzer, "'Order': The Brief and Extraordinary Life of a Catholic Movement," in *The Catholic World Report*, 13 September 2015 (http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/4160/order_the_brief_and_extraordinary_life_of_a_catholic_movement.aspx).

trying to understand Kirk's view of the moral foundation of society, his notion of natural law is closer to the classical and consensual Christian tradition than to the supposedly Catholic interpretations of rationalistic Thomists.

Perhaps Birzer's greatest and most enduring contribution to Kirk scholarship is his very convincing and accurate depiction of Kirk's abiding humanism and the centrality in his thought of community. Kirk believed that the primary obligations of human beings lie in their community. Self-discipline and love of neighbor begin with the individual and spread to the community and then to society as a whole. While Kirk's understanding of community places limits on the larger society and politics, it also assumes the importance of a properly constituted society for creating the moral basis on which the survival of

society ultimately depends.

Although Birzer's *Russell Kirk* is primarily a historical study and cannot go deeply into every aspect of Kirk's thought, it will undoubtedly become the "definitive" work on Kirk as a social, historical, cultural, and political thinker. The book speaks with authority on a broad range of issues and goes into them deeply enough to give sound direction to future research. It should be added that Birzer's way of elucidating Kirk is of interest not only to those looking for information regarding this particular American thinker. While explicating Kirk, Birzer is drawing attention to a larger conservative intellectual tradition and inviting a reconsideration of what that tradition has to offer. Birzer is here not merely an erudite and perceptive historian but also a thinker in his own right.