
The Last Man of Letters? *The Singular Life of Russell Kirk*

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The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict, by Russell Kirk. *Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995. 514 pp. \$34.99.*

“Yet because there was in the beginning the word, he would not abuse words”

—*The Sword of Imagination*, p. 434.

The memoirs of Russell Kirk (1918-1995), perhaps the most distinguished architect of the postwar conservative intellectual revival, are a fitting coda to a life committed to standing firmly athwart the forces of social and cultural disorder. Although Kirk began actively working on his autobiography about a decade ago, the idea for this book, I believe, came to him while he was still a young man. Much of his life seems to have been spent anticipating it. Nearly every scrap of paper written by him, to him or about him, he saved. While in high school, he began a personal journal which he kept for a decade or more. He wrote scores of autobiographical essays. Endowed

with a remarkably retentive memory, Kirk was able to recall in minute detail nearly everything he had ever read and nearly every conversation he had. He “descried in his kaleidoscopic imagination every scene of every year, almost, in his life” (475). From these vast depositories he was able to glean the detailed memories, observations, and insights that fill these memoirs. The history of his own life fascinated him almost as much as the history of civilization. The history of mankind was for him the vast repository of the “wisdom of our ancestors” that a civilized person could draw upon for moral guidance and insight into the human condition. Likewise, he was

intrigued by his own history as a means by which he could come to understand not only the human condition but who and what he was. These memoirs are not only a summary of his life and achievements but a depiction of how he saw himself and how he wanted to be remembered by posterity.

I served, as did many other young people, as Russell Kirk's research assistant at his private library in the tiny rural village of Mecosta, Michigan, where, especially between 1969 and 1985, I was a frequent visitor at "Piety Hill," his ancestral home. As someone who had been treated during these years almost as a member of the Kirk family, I felt, while reading this volume, as if I were revisiting old friends. Many of the tales recounted here were familiar to me. Either I had read them in some previous literary incarnation, heard them told around the Kirk household as family legends, or, in a few cases, was an eye witness to the events being recorded. For me, reading this memoir was like having the conversation with Kirk that I had always wished we could have had. Because he was a shy and reticent man, my efforts at conversation with him often had awkward results. Yet, behind his typewriter his whole demeanor would change. His inhibitions and habitual shyness would vanish.

Kirk was born and reared near the railroad tracks of Plymouth, a suburb of Detroit. His father, Russell Andrew Kirk, a railroad engineer, was impeccable most of the time. His mother's family, the Pierces of Mecosta, once prosperous, were better educated.

Their love of literature was imparted early to the young Kirk. Afflicted with acute nephritis at age three, he was confined to bed for a number of years. "[C]ribbed, cabined, confined," unable to engage in the usual boyhood activities, he amused himself mainly by devouring vast quantities of good books. His childhood suffering was hence "a blessing in disguise" that left him with lifelong love for the written word. The two persons who figured most prominently in his life at that time were his mother, Marjorie Rachel Pierce Kirk, who read to him often while he was bedridden, and his grandfather, Frank Pierce, a banker, who possessed a handsome library of books, eventually inherited by Kirk.

After graduating from Michigan State College, which Kirk considered to be then an undistinguished cow college, he traveled south to Duke University where he wrote his master's thesis on the political thought of John Randolph of Roanoke. This thesis would be published as Kirk's first book. After a stint in the U.S. Army, he retired to MSU as a history instructor. A few years later, he was admitted as a doctoral student at St. Andrews University, Scotland. While there he wrote a fat doctoral dissertation titled "The Conservatives' Rout," which earned him a Doctor of Letters degree. Kirk remains the only American to have earned that degree. This monumental study of the history of conservative ideas would be published in 1953 as *The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Santayana*, presently in its seventh edition, and perhaps still Kirk's greatest achievement. The book would simul-

taneously launch a movement and establish Kirk as a young intellectual star. He would during his life write twenty-eight more books, publish an estimated 10,000 articles, and lecture at hundreds of college campuses. He traveled to nearly every continent and visited almost all the nations of Europe. Along the way, he would meet a fascinating collection of human oddities as well as such luminaries as Richard Nixon, Richard Weaver, Norman Thomas, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot and Malcolm Muggeridge.

To use the popular phrase coined by noted sociologist David Reisman, Kirk was a thoroughly "inner-directed" man. He lived his life remarkably on his own terms. Eschewing the literary and cultural circles of New York, which could have elevated him to grander stages of wealth and fame, he chose to reside "far from the madding crowd" in rural Michigan. Fearful that his intellectual integrity would be compromised, he never yielded either to Mammon or the lust for popularity. He refused academic appointments because he thought that life as a professor would interfere with his writing (156).

Throughout his life he manifested an almost childlike impracticality concerning financial matters. He neither saved nor invested (other than in the forty acres of undeveloped land he owned in Mecosta). "Never save money," Bernard Iddings Bell (who died poor) instructed him, and he never forgot this bit of imprudent advice (163). "Spend it . . . Spend it on schooling your children, on your house, on hospitality, on good

causes," Kirk advises his readers. "Like the grasshoppers that perish, the Kirks took small thought of the morrow" (347). While Kirk describes himself as "a canny Scot," he did not inherit from his ancestors any of their characteristic frugality. His Stoic Christian renunciation of worldly possessions caused him increasing hardships, especially after he had acquired a family. Despite his declining health during the last years of his life, he was compelled by financial necessity to trundle frequently back and forth to the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C., and to numerous other speaking engagements. His "speechifying" and prodigious literary output during the last years of his life no doubt took their toll on his health. His vast library, so carefully and lovingly accumulated over a lifetime, had to be sold to Hillsdale College to pay off family debts shortly before his death. He was even careless about his valuable possessions. James McClellan, who co-authored with Kirk the first biography of Sen. Robert Taft ever written, recalled to me once seeing in Kirk's garage a 1936 Packard in mint condition that Kirk had inherited from one of his aunts. On a visit to Mecosta, he noticed that this valuable antique had vanished. "Where did the car go, Russell?" Dr. McClellan inquired. "I gave it away to a local boy," replied Kirk off-handedly. It never occurred to him to inquire about the value of the car.

Kirk was certainly not opposed to saving as a matter of principle. In fact, in 1988, he wrote an economics textbook *Economics: Work and Prosperity* in which he entitled one chapter

“Why Everyone Needs to Save.” Here, he uses the ancient fable of “The Grasshopper and the Ant” to illustrate to the reader why the failure to save will lead to ruination. Despite the moral of the tale, Kirk in his personal life identified more with the grasshopper than the cheerless ant. Unlike the author of the tale, he was convinced that in the end God would provide.

Though never financially well off, the Kirks gladly endured personal deprivations to provide for the needs of their many guests. Kirk and his wife, Annette, displayed an unlimited generosity toward those who crossed their path. They willingly gave of themselves to those in need of their kindness or assistance without thought of recompense. Over the years, all sorts of characters turned up at Piety Hill: visiting scholars, artists, and students, most of them, but also people who could be described as bores and time-wasters. One occasional visitor to Piety Hill, I recall, was so tiresome that even the proverbially tolerant Kirks would hide upon hearing of his impending arrival. They reacted to his coming as if Attila the Hun and his marauders were heading in their direction, and they remained in self-imposed exile until this intruder had departed. Nevertheless, they were unable to tell this person that his presence was unwelcome.

Some people accumulate stray animals. Annette collected stray people—prostitutes, hobos, misfits, homeless unwed mothers, refugees from political oppression or modernity, and assorted lost souls. She took them all in and gave them sustenance, support,

and a sympathetic ear. Afterwards, she didn’t have the heart to kick them out, even when they had overstayed their welcome. Kirk was always the willing accomplice in his wife’s expensive hobby.

Many autobiographies are written with an eye toward settling old scores, but this is not one of them. These memoirs are striking because of the absence of any rancor or bitterness toward old intellectual or literary adversaries. Kirk harbored no grudges toward people with whom he had crossed literary swords. In the 1950s *Time* and *Newsweek* hailed him as one of America’s leading intellectuals. In subsequent years, however, the intellectual establishment paid little attention to him. In the last two decades of his life, he was largely ignored by prominent conservative figures. Neo-conservative writers eclipsed him as the publicly recognized spokesmen for conservative principles. So-called paleoconservatives dismissed him for not being sufficiently aggressive in challenging liberal social and cultural dominance. Samuel Francis, a leading paleoconservative, describes him by implication in a recent book as a “beautiful loser,” a fine writer whose work had little practical impact on the course of events. The major publishing houses had no interest in his work, and his books were only rarely reviewed in prestigious or mass circulation publications. Yet, his neglect by the literary establishment and the criticism directed at him by his fellow conservatives seemed not to have troubled Kirk in the least. He fought major battles with some of his con-

temporaries at *National Review*. Though he briefly mentions his disagreements with the late Frank S. Meyer (whom he describes as “an extreme individualist” [150]) and the late Willmoore Kendall (a “Rousseauist populist” with whom he felt “ill at ease” [188]), he expresses no personal distaste for these opponents.

“Let no man consider himself happy until the hour of his death,” said the ancient Athenian lawgiver, Solon. If this be the measure of a happy life, Kirk by his own calculations considered his own life to have been a happy one. He claims to have accomplished most of what he had intended. He had set for himself three major goals: First, he “sought to conserve a patrimony of order, justice, and freedom; a tolerable social order and an inheritance of culture”—an aspiration in which, he concludes, “he had succeeded somewhat.” Secondly, he had wanted “to lead a life of decent independence” as a man of letters. This aspiration he also believed he had achieved. Lastly, he had “wanted to marry for love and to rear children,” and with Annette, who bore him four daughters, he had accomplished this end. “Thus his three wishes had been granted; he was grateful. Power over others, and

much money, he never had desired; he had been spared those responsibilities.”

The last wish was certainly granted. As for the first two objectives, his success was more problematic. He fought the good battle against the forces of social disorder and cultural destruction and persuaded many to follow him, but little persuasive evidence exists to suggest his efforts had much effect. The destructive forces of egalitarianism and social engineering continue to eat away at the last vestiges of civilized existence. The world may have to become a far worse place before it can begin the steep ascent back toward the civilized social order that Kirk had envisioned. The “Republican Revolution,” while fiscally useful, shows little interest in the cultural regeneration that was the main objective of Kirk’s thought.

But Kirk, more than most, devoted his life to the long haul. As he frequently reminded audiences, quoting his friend T. S. Eliot, “The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.” Russell Kirk’s books and essays, and his noble example of a life well spent, will outlive those of most of his more famous contemporaries.