
No Nice Little Histories

Mark Melcher

America's British Culture, by Russell Kirk. *New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1993. ix+122 pp. \$24.95.*

The Politics of Prudence, by Russell Kirk. *Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1993. 304 pp. \$12.95.*

It is apparent to even the most casual observer that the United States is in the midst of a period of extraordinary cultural change. The political maturation of the baby-boom generation, which formed many of its ideas in the turbulent late '60s and early '70s, made this change inevitable. From one perspective, it is healthy. Each new generation, after all, must decide the kind of society it desires for itself and for its children. The American republic must change to stay vigorous and alive. But the end of the cold war removed an important unifying element from American society that would have acted as a moderating influence on the inevitable tensions during this period of leadership transfer. This development has heightened the danger that the debate could spin out of control and permanently damage the body politic.

At such a time, a voice of moderation from the White House would be welcome. Instead, we have a president who proclaims that everything is "broken," that "change" is the touchstone of his administration. The government needs to be "reinvented." The entire health care system needs to be rebuilt from the ground up. A kind of utopian verve drives White House policy. The president's wife announces that she has a "burning desire . . . to make the world around me—kind of going out in concentric circles—better for everybody." Health care reform is just a start, she says. The nation needs an entirely new approach to politics, a new "politics of meaning."

The situation brings to mind Burke's timeless warning against the "distemper of remedy" that gripped ideologues in both France and Eng-

land in his time. "A cheap, bloodless reformation, a guiltless liberty, appear flat and vapid to their taste. There must be a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination, grown torpid with the lazy enjoyment of sixty years' security, and the still unanimating repose of public prosperity."

The right has naturally reacted to this zeal for wholesale change with horror, and not always with good sense. Cries for radical change of a different sort are heard everyday from their ranks. Some conservatives argue, for example, that the nation must close the gates to immigrants, that we must dramatically curtail international trade, that we must disengage from foreign entanglements. Others argue that only an all-out attack against government can stem the growing tide of bad government.

The center is threatened. It is becoming more difficult each day for the falcon to hear the falconer. A sense of history and a strong measure of prudence are needed.

Enter Russell Kirk with two new books, somewhat unfashionably titled in this period of domestic political pandemonium, *America's British Culture* and *The Politics of Prudence*. These books are not tomes filled with abstract theories, written to impress the reader with the author's erudition. These are action books—philosophy, history and political science skillfully applied to practical issues. They are written with a message; they are wake-up calls in the tradition of *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega y Gasset's

pithy warning to Europe before the outbreak of World War II. Kirk is alarmed. He has identified the enemy, and he presents his message neat, straight up, if you will.

In *America's British Culture*, we are treated first to a short, but remarkably detailed, history lesson that drives home the point that our language and literature, our legal system, our form of government, and our entire body of moral habits, beliefs, conventions and customs find their roots in British society. This patrimony, Kirk maintains, is threatened by people who hate and envy these traditions and customs. They are, he says, "bent upon deconstructing the edifice of Anglo-American culture." If they are successful, he charges, "Chaos and old Night" await. "If Americans lose their British patrimony, they must become barbarians, and on their darkling plains ignorant armies of ideologues may clash by night." These are grave charges, and not easily proved. Indeed, they cannot be "proved," anymore than Ortega y Gasset could "prove" his thesis that Bolshevism and Fascism were "false dawns" and that the advancement of either would lead to the destruction of Europe. But Kirk makes his case well.

The language and literature transmitted to America from Britain, he notes, carried with them certain assumptions about liberty, order, and the human condition that are fundamental to the American way of life. American common and positive law, derived from English law, gives fuller protection to the individual person than does the legal system of any

other country.

The American system of representative government, patterned upon British institutions dating from medieval times is, Kirk argues, directly responsible for the political stability that has ensured our freedom and liberty for over 200 years. He cites Tocqueville's celebrated observation that it is America's system of mores, rooted deeply in Britain, that makes the United States "capable of maintaining the rule of democracy."

The greatest contemporary enemy to America's cultural heritage, Kirk maintains, is the multiculturalist movement, which he notes originated within the academy. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s observation concerning this movement sums up Kirk's concern: "[I]f we press further down the road to cultural separatism and ethnic fragmentation, if we institutionalize the classification of our citizens by ethnic and racial criteria and if we abandon our historic commitment to an American identity, what will hold our people together then?" What indeed?

Kirk's remedy, a renewed effort toward cultural restoration, follows from his diagnosis. What is refreshing in this period of heated, polarizing verbal warfare between the left and the right is Kirk's insistence that those on the right make their case with prudence, with an understanding of history, with a reverence for inherited wisdom.

This brings us to Kirk's second book, *The Politics of Prudence*. The message here, while delivered temperately, is still urgent. The ideologue,

Kirk maintains, whether representing the left or the right, is anathema to the American political process. It is mandatory, therefore, for the right to remember during the battle ahead what it is to be a conservative. The right must cling firmly to its roots, understand these roots, study them, water and nourish them, and never forget them. Nowhere is this message more clear than in the two chapters Kirk devotes to neoconservatives and libertarians. Both groups, he argues, are infatuated with ideology and deficient in their understanding of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization.

Neoconservatives, he says, "thrust upon us a great deal of useful information," but their "quasi-religion of democratic capitalism cannot do duty for imagination and right reason and prescriptive wisdom, in domestic politics or in foreign relations." Neocons, he says, are "clever creatures," with whom the seven cardinal virtues go unmentioned. Libertarians, Kirk argues, are "radical doctrinaires, contemptuous of our inheritance." They follow a "simplistic ideology of universal selfishness—at a time when the country needs more than ever before men and women who stand ready to subordinate their private interests, if need be, to the defense of the Permanent Things. We flawed human creatures are sufficiently selfish already, without being exhorted to pursue selfishness on principle."

Wake up, Kirk says to these groups. The nation desperately needs opponents of the left, of multiculturalism and other movements destructive of the American heritage, to unite be-

hind traditional principles and beliefs as outlined by such as Burke, Tocqueville, Babbitt, Hayek, Brownson, Röpke, Muggeridge, and Eliot.

Many reviewers appear to have found these two books to be nothing more than nice little histories, refreshing dutch-uncle talks by an aging Kirk to fellow conservatives. They are wrong. Kirk is ever an activist. His rhetoric may sound tame—prudent, if you will—by today’s standards. But his exhortations are fraught with urgency. Nothing less than the future of American society as we know it is at stake. Kirk is, shall we say, an Ortega y Gasset who has spent a great deal of time in Britain.

Kirk acknowledges, as Burke did, that change is “the means of our preservation.” But he argues that a nation’s continuity of experience “offers a guide to policy far better than the abstract designs of coffee house philosophers.” Kirk’s book treats us to a marvelous 300-page romp of history, philosophy, personal observations, memories and admonitions. Among other things, Kirk offers a discussion of ten conservative principles, ten historical events that illustrate what con-

servatives revere, brief reviews of ten great conservative books, and glimpses into the lives, writings, thoughts, and experiences of ten “exemplary conservatives” from Cicero to Richard Weaver and Freya Stark. Kirk then discusses the evils of the “beheemoth state,” a failing educational system, the growth of the American proletariat—which he defines as people who give nothing to the commonwealth but their progeny—and the rising influence in American politics of what he calls the “intemperate mind.” Parts of this tour duplicate some of his prior writings. But Kirk is a poet who writes prose, and as with all good poetry, one gains new insights with each reading.

These are “interesting” books, “insightful” also. And they make “marvelous reading,” as many reviewers have noted. But they are more than that. They nourish and strengthen us for action. Kirk knows that people fight better if they understand well that for which they are fighting. Nice little histories don’t end by exhorting young people to restore and redeem their patrimony “so to save the world from suicide.”