

TEN CONSERVATIVE BOOKS

by Russell Kirk

The political and moral attitude called conservatism does not come out of a book; indeed, some of the most conservative folk I have known have been distinctly unbookish. For the sources of a conservative order are not theoretical writings, but rather custom, convention, and continuity. Edmund Burke could imagine nothing more wicked than the heart of an abstract metaphysician in politics--that is, a learned fool or rogue who fancies that he can sweep away the complex institutions of a civilized society, painfully developed over centuries of historical experience, in order to substitute some bookish design of his own for the Terrestrial Paradise. There exists, then, no conservative equivalent of Das Kapital; and, God willing, there never will be.

To put this another way, conservatism is not a bundle of theories got up by some closet philosopher. On the contrary, the conservative conviction grows out of experience: the experience of the species, of the nation, of the person. As I pointed out in my most recent Heritage Lecture, conservatism is the negation of ideology. The informed conservative understands that our 20th century social institutions--the common law being a good example of this--have developed slowly by compromise, consensus, and the test of practicality. They did not spring full-grown out of somebody's book; and it is the practical statesman, rather than the visionary recluse, who has maintained a healthy tension between the claims of authority and the claims of freedom; who has shaped a tolerable political constitution.

The Constitution of the United States, two centuries old, is a sufficient example of the origin of conservative institutions in the people's experience, not from abstract treatises. The better-schooled delegates to the Constitutional Convention, among them Hamilton and Madison, would refer now and again to Aristotle or to Montesquieu, by way of reinforcing an argument; yet their own political wisdom, and the Constitution that they framed, were rooted in direct personal experience of the political and social institutions that had developed in the Thirteen Colonies since the middle of the 17th century, and in

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on September 11, 1986.

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thorough knowledge of the British growth, over seven centuries, of parliamentary government, ordered freedom, and the rule of law. They acknowledged no Omniscient Book as their political oracle; and despite the fancy of various American professors that the Framers were enthusiastic devotees of John Locke, nobody at the Convention even mentioned Locke's Civil Government.

A moment ago I remarked that the conservative mind looks to custom, convention, and continuity for an understanding of the civil social order--not to such artificial constructions as the pretended Social Contract. Let us define our terms, by reference to the larger dictionaries.

Custom is common use or practice, either of an individual or of a community, but especially of the latter; habitual repetition of the same act or procedure; established manner or way. In law, custom signifies the settled habitudes of a community, such as are and have been for an indefinite time past generally recognized in it as the standards of what is just and right; ancient and general usage having the force of law.

Convention is the act of coming together; coalition; union. This term also signifies general agreement, tacit understanding, common consent, or the foundation of a custom or an institution. Convention implies a customary rule, regulation, or requirement, or such rules collectively; sometimes more or less arbitrarily established, or required by common consent or opinion; a conventionality; a precedent.

Continuity signifies uninterrupted connection of parts in space or time; uninterruptedness; in a culture or a political system, continuity implies an unbroken link or series of links joining generation to generation, as the Eastern Orthodox liturgy has it, "ages to ages."

It is possible for books to comment upon custom, convention, and continuity; but not for books to create those social and cultural essences. Society brings forth books; books do not bring forth society. I emphasize this point because we live in an age of ideology, and a good many people--especially professors and graduate students--fall into the curious notion that all institutions, and all wisdom, somehow are extracted from certain books. (In religion, this becomes what Coleridge called bibliolatry.) The Bible is a record of spiritual experiences, not the source of spiritual experiences, really. And from time to time some student has asked me, after a lecture of mine, "Gee, Doc, where'd you get all that information? I couldn't find it The Book"--that is, the Sacred Textbook, ordinarily a turgid superficial work written by a mediocre professor whose motive has been greed. The wisdom of the species is not comprehended in any seven-foot shelf of books.

So, ladies and gentlemen, if you have been seeking for some Infallible Manual of Pure Conservatism--why, you have been wasting your time. Conservatism not being an ideology, it has no presumptuous crib, the fond creation of some Terrible Simplifier, to which the ingenuous devotee of political salvation may repair whenever in doubt. Do not fall into political bibliolatry; in particular, do not regard Kirk's Works as written by one endowed with the prophetic afflatus.

In those dear dead days almost beyond recall when I used to keep a bookshop, a small glum man browsed about my tables and shelves one afternoon, and presently said to me, almost angrily, "I'm looking for a book that will tell us what to do about all these modern problems. But it has to be a small book, and there can't be anything about religion in it." Alas, no small book, or big one either, has been written to tell us honestly and practically what to do about all these modern problems, nor will one such ever be published, not even by a conservative author. And if you should be seeking for a sound book of a conservative cast that has no religion in it--why, you might as well search for the philosopher's stone; or inquire, with Tiberius, what songs the Sirens sang.

Therefore in commending to you this day ten important conservative books, I provide you with merely a sampling of the literature of conservatism--not with a corpus of infallible writings on which a zealot might base a conservative Thirty-Nine Articles or a Test Act. Conservative people share a state of mind or a body of sentiments; they do not necessarily all agree on prudential concerns; the variety of conservative approaches to political and moral questions is considerable. I do not argue that these ten books I am about to name are the most important conservative writings; merely that they are intelligently representative of conservative thought. For conservatives do think, even though one conservative scholar, F. J. C. Hearnshaw, remarks that ordinarily it is sufficient for conservatives to sit and think, or perhaps merely to sit. Being no ideologue, the conservative thinker does not fall into the error that the pride and passion and prejudice of mankind may be controlled and directed satisfactorily by any set of abstract ideas. To cite the title of a book by my old friend Richard Weaver (who detested that publisher's title to his book), Ideas Have Consequences, true; but in politics abstract ideas very often have bad consequences; and the conservative knows that custom, convention, and continuity are forces socially more beneficial than are the fulminations of some gloomy political fanatic. Conservative writing, then, usually is undertaken with some reluctance, and chiefly in reaction against radical or liberal tracts pretending to point out the path to the earthly Zion. So it was with Burke two centuries ago, and so it is today with Malcolm Muggeridge or Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

From my list I have eliminated certain great statesmen, because what they wrote was of little enduring influence, although what they

did had large enduring consequences. Also I have left out the great conservative novelists, among them Walter Scott and Benjamin Disraeli and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad, because they did not write specifically of conservative political questions, even though their indirect influence upon public opinion may have been vast. In short, I confine myself this day to books directly and unquestionably political in subject and conservative in tone.

In 1955, addressing the London Conservative Union, T. S. Eliot named Bolingbroke, Burke, Coleridge, and Disraeli as the chief conservative men of letters; and of living or recent American writers--quoting from a letter of mine to him--Eliot mentioned Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Bernard Iddings Bell, and Robert Nisbet. Since Bolingbroke, Coleridge, and Disraeli none of them wrote a one-volume manual of politics that would be readily apprehended by the modern reader, I must pass them by in our discussion today. I am going to say something about Burke and Babbitt and Eliot and Nisbet, nevertheless.

Some present here today may desire to commence their serious study of conservative thought by reading some succinct but sensible manual on the subject. If so, I commend particularly a brand-new slim volume by Robert A. Nisbet, entitled simply Conservatism: Dream and Reality (University of Minnesota Press), agreeing with everything in it except for Dr. Nisbet's attempt to classify conservatism as an ideology, and his praise of Kirk's Works. Two earlier slim volumes on this subject, both by the same title, The Case for Conservatism, were written by Francis Graham Wilson and by Quintin Hogg; both unhappily are out of print. If you desire an anthology of conservative essays, speeches, poems, and tales, The Portable Conservative Reader, edited by your servant, is very much in print; if what you seek is an historical analysis of conservative thought, the seventh (and presumably final) edition of your servant's tall book The Conservative Mind will be published this month. Now for the ten books to which I particularly direct your attention, as swimming in the main current of conservative thought; I describe them more or less in chronological order.

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One begins with Burke, for the word "conservative" was not part of the vocabulary of politics until French admirers of that Irish statesman adapted that word to describe the principles of men who would join to the best in the old order of Europe those necessary healthful improvements which would preserve the continuity of civilization. Without Burke's speeches and pamphlets, and especially his eloquent Reflections on the Revolution in France, conservatively inclined people would be intellectually impoverished. As even Harold

Laski wrote once, "Burke has endured as the permanent manual without which statesmen are as sailors on an uncharted sea." Foreseeing the revolutions of our time, Burke expounded the principles of social order that conservatives have endeavored ever since to defend.

I have discussed Edmund Burke in several other Heritage Lectures. Were it possible, I should like to discuss his contemporary John Adams, in some sense his American counterpart; but much though Adams wrote, no one treatise of his stands out as a seminal work of politics that has greatly influenced men of conservative inclinations. This is a pity, for abundance of wisdom and wit are to be encountered in the ten fat volumes of his writings, edited by his grandson, that were published in 1956; or in the many volumes of the Adams Papers that were published more than a century later. Yet I suppose that very few people have joined me in reading every sentence of Adams that ever was published; so I must pass on for my second conservative book--commending in passing George A. Peek's The Political Writings of John Adams, an anthology--to the conservative writer whose influence, at least in America, has been second only to Burke's.

Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, still the best sociological study of our mass-age, was written in dread of the tyranny of the majority and of democratic materialism; the second volume of that great work is strongly influenced by Burke's writings. Tocqueville understood the drift of the American people in the first half of the 19th century as did no one else; and the drift still is in the direction he predicted, though we are a century and a half farther down the river.

Incidentally, although Dr. F. A. Hayek abjures the term "conservative" along with the terms "liberal" and "libertarian," nevertheless he acknowledges his discipleship to both Burke and Tocqueville, calling himself an Old Whig, as did Burke; so perhaps he is more of a conservative than he pretends to be.

For our third conservative book, I offer you The American Democrat, by James Fenimore Cooper, a contemporary of Tocqueville. Despite the strong surviving popularity of the Leatherstocking Tales, even among serious critics of literature, not one-twentieth the number of people have read The American Democrat as have read Democracy in America; one hopes that the handsome new edition of The American Democrat brought out a few years ago by Liberty Classics may find its way into the hands of attentive readers. Its strongest point is Cooper's bold advocacy of the need for honorable leadership in a democratic society.

Chronologically, there now looms up the strong-minded John C. Calhoun; but neither A Disquisition on Government nor A Discourse on the Constitution, respected though both books are by political scientists, is readily understood by many people nowadays. So for our fourth volume I take from my shelves a book by an ardent Catholic who

would be considerably displeased by certain bishops' pastoral letters of recent origin.

I refer to The American Republic, published in 1865, by Orestes Brownson, a Catholic Yankee, long-lived and argumentative. One thing on which Mr. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and I agree is the importance of Brownson. Calhoun and Brownson were the first American public men to use the term conservative as a word of praise--so early as the 1840s. Brownson was the first writer to reply, sternly and systematically, to Marx's Communist Manifesto. The American Republic analyzes this country's unwritten and written constitutions, and describes the American mission of reconciling the claims of authority and of liberty.

Because this lecture is delivered in Washington, I emphasize American books relevant to our national concerns; were I speaking in Britain, I would say more about English and Scottish political writers. In Victorian England the books of James Fitzjames Stephen, W. E. H. Lecky, and Henry Maine were written to withstand the threat of democracy and socialism. As our fifth book, I select Stephen's Liberty, Equality, Fraternity--a mordant refutation both of the slogan of the French Revolution and of John Stuart Mill's On Liberty. I believe Stephen's powerful assault can be obtained from a reprint house, at a high price.

As the end of the 19th century approached, the wittiest and most systematic of English conservative men of letters was W. H. Mallock, the author of more than a score of books, ranging all the way from psychological novels and volumes of travel and memoirs to keen economic analyses. Except for his satirical first book, The New Republic, Mallock is read scarcely at all nowadays, and most of his books are unobtainable in the United States except at great research libraries. Yet I strongly urge you to lay your hands, if you can, upon a copy of the sixth conservative book of my choice, Mallock's Is Life Worth Living? This polemical work, powerfully written, is a warning against the personal and social ennui that follows upon a general loss of the religious sense: a society bored to death.

Turn we again to the Americans. During the first three decades of the 20th century two important critics of literature, Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt, were the most intelligent conservatives in this country. It is difficult to choose between More's Aristocracy and Justice and Babbitt's Democracy and Leadership--the latter available from the Liberty Press, with an introduction by your servant. But let me recommend, for our present purposes, Democracy and Leadership as our seventh book of this confining list. Babbitt courageously endeavored to restore an understanding of the true meaning of justice, and to remind his time of the perils of materialistic expansion and centralization, and to defend the ethical purpose of humane letters. Late this year there will be published by the National Humanities Institute a new edition of Babbitt's

Literature and the American College, with a very long introduction by me. Several of Babbitt's and More's books have been reprinted in recent years--a sign of the renewal of conservative thought.

Both before and after the Civil War, half the important conservative books of America have been written in the South. As a noble specimen of the conservative mind of the South, I take for my eighth conservative book The Attack on Leviathan, by Donald Davidson, of Tennessee, poet, critic, historian, ballad-collector, champion of the southern inheritance. I happened upon The Attack on Leviathan in a college library when I was a freshman, and it converted me into an adversary of the consolidated mass-state. In Policy Review's pages, more than two years ago, I gave some account of how that eloquent book was virtually suppressed by the university press that published it; Davidson, when we met in the 1950s, was surprised that I had found a copy anywhere. But the book has been reprinted by another firm, and you ought to seek it out, for it is the most important ignored political work of America in this century.

Most influential economists have been liberals old style or liberals new style, and sufficiently narrow in their views of human existence. For my ninth conservative work, however, I name The Social Crisis of Our Times, by my old friend Wilhelm Röpke, of Germany and Switzerland. This book is an analysis of the menace that Röpke called "the cult of the colossal." Of the many unpleasant consequences of mass society, the worst is proletarianization. We must find our way back to the humane scale, in economics and in politics: "Socialism, collectivism, and their political and cultural appendages are, after all, only the last consequences of our yesterday; they are the last convulsions of the nineteenth century, and only in them do we reach the lowest point of a century-old development along the wrong road; these are the hopeless final stage toward which we drift unless we act...." So Röpke wrote about 1949. The several books of this remarkable social thinker now are quite unavailable in the United States, except possibly for A Humane Economy (to which I gave the title).

As my tenth conservative book, I recommend that you read, friends, T. S. Eliot's Notes towards the Definition of Culture. President Nixon, in the White House, once asked me what one book he ought to read, the narrow limits of his leisure considered. "Notes towards the Definition of Culture," I replied; and when he inquired why, I explained that this slim volume touches upon the reasons for the decadence of modern society, the substitution of a bureaucratic specialized elite for a healthy leading class, the relationships that ought to be maintained between men in public station and men of ideas, and what is worth preserving in our culture. More than any other writer of the 20th century, Eliot stood up for custom, convention, and continuity in society, and for the moral order of our common civilization. You should read, too, his other little volume about our civil social order, The Idea of a Christian Society. Both volumes

remain readily available in bookshops: Eliot's high reputation is difficult to squelch.

There! I have opened the covers of ten books for you--choosing them with some eye to the diversity of the conservative impulse--and have mentioned other good ones. Reflections on the Revolution in France, Democracy in America, The American Democrat, The American Republic, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Is Life Worth Living?, Democracy and Leadership, The Attack on Leviathan, The Social Crisis of Our Times, Notes towards the Definition of Culture--if you line up those volumes on a shelf and religiously read one chapter in one of them each night, until you have read and digested all ten, you will acquire very considerable political and moral wisdom. Their several authors were an Irish politician, a French traveller and man of law, a novelist in the state of New York, a Catholic journalist, an English judge, an English satirist, a Harvard professor, a Southern poet, a Swiss economist, and an Anglo-American man of letters: not one of them, let it be noted, a professor of political science.

With great ease I could have named for you ten other conservative books, quite as important, some of the alternative ten by the writers I have named today, but others by quite different authors. The literature of conservative opinion, accumulating over two centuries, has grown impressive in its bulk, as in its high quality. The question remains whether one may readily put his hands upon most of it.

You will have observed that I have named not one book, of my ten, by an author still living. That is not for lack of titles from which to choose; rather, I am embarrassed by a wealth of interesting and competent conservative writing today--which is not to suggest that we suffer from a surplus of original genius. Some of the more perceptive conservative minds today are to be encountered in unexpected places: Tage Lindbom, in Sweden, for one, or persecuted Russian writers of the USSR. Among men of high intellectual powers and literary arts still in this land of the living, here in America, are Eliseo Vivas, Andrew Lytle, Cleanth Brooks, and a score more I might name: men of letters of a conservative cast of mind. On the other hand, I note that in the late John East's forthcoming book about American conservative political thinkers of the past few decades, only one still lives. Eric Voegelin, Willmoore Kendall, Leo Strauss, Richard Weaver, Frank S. Meyer, Ludwig von Mises--all have departed from this bourne. The last leaf on John East's tree of the Philosophical Founders stands before you.

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I am reasonably sure that some of you present here today have reflected to yourselves, during this past half hour, "If so large a body of good or even great books of a conservative character exists, why is it that we infrequently encounter such volumes in bookshops or public libraries? Why were we not introduced to such books in school, college, and university? Why are not books of this sort on the best-seller lists? Why do we read reviews of them--supposing them reviewed at all--only in periodicals of a confessedly conservative persuasion, or in some religious journal, or at most in The Wall Street Journal? Why does even National Review apparently prefer to review at length books already reviewed by The New York Review of Books or The New York Times?"

And why, you may have ruminated, are a good many of the old books commended today so long out of print? Why does no publisher make them available, when they are free, most of them, of copyright restraints, and when presumably they would sell as well to the American public as do many serious books of a different school of thought that are readily picked up in bookshops? Why is the publishing of recognizably conservative books, new or old, confined to a few small or smallish publishers, with limited capital and modes of distribution--Regnery Gateway (now moving its offices to Washington), Sherwood Sugden, Liberty Classics/Liberty Press, occasionally one of the university presses?

Why, because there still prevails a leaden domination over trade-book publishing, and for the most part over scholarly publishing, by yesteryear's climate of ritualistic-liberal opinion. To find a Manhattan publisher for any well-written book that seems to reflect the wisdom of our ancestors is as arduous an undertaking as one of the labors of Hercules--and less attended by success.

This hegemony of an archaic American liberalism, grown perfectly intolerant and flinching at shadows, extends to book reviewing in the very large majority of both popular and scholarly media of criticism. At the very time when public opinion has shifted massively toward conservative measures and men, the intellectuals of the publishing world have marched off defiantly in an opposite direction. They are very willing, as a breed, to make much money by publishing pornography and reviewing it in a snickering, titillating fashion; but even the prospect of profit will not tempt these lofty-minded editors and reviewers to touch conservative pitch and be defiled.

Of the books I have commended this afternoon, the majority still linger in print, but are not readily come by in bookshops or public libraries; while some have been quite unavailable for a long while. Had I named conservative books by authors less famous, I might as well have been talking about the vanished books of Livy's history, for all the chance you ladies and gentlemen might have had of finding a copy to read.

The origins of this anti-conservative mentality among publishers' editors and among reviewers and librarians are worth discussing; for that, however, another lecture would be required; and remedies for this discriminatory malady will not soon be found. One palliative might be an injection of capital into publishing firms that know the meaning of custom, convention, and continuity; but apparently (with a few honorable exceptions) the people whom Franklin Roosevelt reproached as Malefactors of Great Wealth think books of small consequence.

At the beginning of this lecture, I remarked that the conservative impulse is not the product of books, but rather of attachment to custom, convention, and continuity. Conservatives are more concerned with real things than with the abstractions of the Academy of Lagado or of Cloud Cuckoo-Land. Nevertheless, fallacious books have had a great deal to do with fetching down the old framework of order in most of the world, during the past 200 years; and sound books about the human condition and about the civil social order can accomplish much, by rousing a healthy intellectual reaction, to preserve order and justice and freedom.

The number of Americans who read serious books of any sort and form their judgments upon them seems certain to diminish even more rapidly during the remainder of this century than it already has since the Second World War. This diminishing remnant, nevertheless, may amount to that body of unknown persons who, Dicey says, are the real authors of public opinion. The great conservative writers always have addressed a minority of the reading public; but that may be changing, as the reading public itself is much narrowed and filtered by films and other dubious entertainments. As Lionel Trilling suggested mournfully in 1950, the literary imagination of the liberals is bankrupt. So it might come to pass, paradoxically enough, that conservative books may command more authority and influence in the 21st century than they could in the 18th, the 19th, or the 20th.

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