

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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Ten Exemplary
Conservatives

By Russell Kirk



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TEN EXEMPLARY CONSERVATIVES

by Russell Kirk

In ways mysterious our political preferences are formed. "When did you decide to become a conservative?" people sometimes inquire of me. But I never did decide: I found myself a conservative, once I began to reflect upon such concerns. Others find themselves liberals or radicals, without quite being able to account for that inclination.

Occasionally, nevertheless, we contrive to recall a conversation, a book, a public meeting, a chance encounter, a rebuff, an opportunity, a moment of solitary reflection, or the example of some man or woman, which drew or pushed us in some degree toward a particular view of politics. I think, for example, of a Sunday afternoon in my father's company, resting on a slope high above the village millpond, I a little boy. We lay in the shade of great trees; and I recall reflecting on the peace and beauty of the scene, and the great age of the trees--and wishing that everything about us that day might never change. That is the fundamental conservative impulse: the longing for order and permanence in the person and in the republic.

Or I think of walking with my grandfather, a sagacious and courageous man, along a railway cut through a glacial moraine, we talking of British history--for I had been reading Dickens' A Child's History of England. That communion with an old gentleman I admired infinitely, and our reflections that day upon the living past, were among the influences that have prevented me from becoming an evangel of Modernity.

Again, it may be the example of some eminent champion of the permanent things that moves us: some living man, perhaps, or some figure of antique grandeur, dust long ago. His actions shape our beliefs; and we find ourselves applying his convictions and emulating his policies, so far as possible, perhaps in a different age or land.

So I present to you this day, ladies and gentlemen, brief sketches of ten people of a conservative cast of mind who did much to form my opinions over the years. I do not suggest that these ten are

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation December 11, 1986.

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the grandest figures ever cast in the conservative mold, although the names of two or three of them would appear on almost any informed person's list of great defenders of an old order; I am merely including particular public figures or shapers of ideas who formed my conservative mind. Of course I was influenced by a hundred more; but the ones I am about to name worked upon my imagination fairly early--the first eight of them, at least. I refrain today from including any authors whom I discussed in my earlier Heritage Lecture on "Ten Conservative Books"--which deletion removes from consideration both Edmund Burke and T. S. Eliot, the men with whom my book The Conservative Mind begins and ends, respectively. Presumably everybody agrees that Burke is the greatest of conservative thinkers; but I omit him today because I have written and said so much about him already, over the past thirty-five years; and about Eliot, too, I have written a big book.

Thus I offer you this day ten exemplary conservatives, with much diversity of talents among them--the most recent among them separated in time by more than two thousand years from the first-born in their number. What they share is an affection for the permanent things, and the courage to affirm that truth was not born yesterday. They are the giants upon whose shoulders stand such dwarfs as myself. Tall though they loom, I cannot allot many more than three hundred words to any one of them. I hope merely to wake your memories of them, or to induce you to admire them for the first time. Here they are in diminishing order of antiquity: first, Marcus Tullius Cicero.

In my high school days, before the ghastly triumph of educational instrumentalism, a large proportion of the pupils used to study ancient history for a year and Latin for two years. Thus was I introduced to Cicero, a man of law and philosophy who set his face against a military revolution, and lost, and paid with his head. Conservative was not a term of politics during the first century before Christ, but presumably Cicero would not have objected to being so described, he being something of a philologist: the English word conservative is derived from the Latin conservator, signifying one who preserves from injury, violence, or infraction.

The orations and the life of the defender of the expiring Roman Republic were studied closely in every decent upper school in Britain and America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and well into the nineteenth. As a high school senior, I read a novel about Cicero and Caesar, Phyllis Bentley's Freedom, Farewell; that led me to Plutarch's life of Cicero, and I recall sitting on my front porch by the railway station, most of one summer, reading Plutarch through, and being moved by Cicero especially.

Cicero died for the old Roman constitution; ever since then, men defending constitutional order have looked to Cicero as their exemplar. As I have said elsewhere, one heroic custom of the early Romans was to "devote" a man to the gods, that through his sacrifice

the commonwealth might be forgiven for wrongdoing. To the mores majorum, and to the moral law, Cicero gave the last full measure of devotion. At times in his public life, Cicero had been timid or vacillating; yet at the end, the high old Roman virtue was his. That model of virtue endures in the conservative's consciousness. Roma immortalis is no vain boast, after all.

Thus my second conservative exemplar is Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the Stoic emperor. I read him earnestly during my first years as a soldier, I often seated solitary on a sand dune, the treeless desert stretching far away to grim mountains: appropriately enough, for Marcus Aurelius' book of meditations has been dear to soldiers over the centuries, among them John Smith at Jamestown and Gordon at Khartoum.

About Marcus Aurelius I corresponded with Albert Jay Nock, that strong individualist and essayist, during the last year of Nock's life. "The world has not once looked upon his like," Nock wrote of Marcus, in his essay "The Value of Useless Knowledge," "and his praise is for ever and ever. Yet hardly was the breath out of his body before the rotten social fabric of Rome disintegrated, and the empire crumbled to pieces."

Marcus Aurelius writes of the beauty of a ripe fig, trembling on the verge of deliquescence; I ventured to suggest to Nock that this passage in the Meditations may hint at a certain fascination with decadence; Nock denied it. However that may be, the Emperor acted in a decadent age, corruption all about him, so that, in his phrase, it was necessary for him to "live as upon a mountain," isolated from intimacies. Today's conservatives, too, see about them a bent world.

It was the heroic endeavor of Marcus Aurelius to conserve Romanitas, that grand system of law and order and culture. If he failed--even with his wife, even with his son--still he left an example of integrity that has endured, like his equestrian statue on the Capitoline, down to our time. In Nock's words, "The cancer of organized mendicancy, subvention, bureaucracy and centralization had so far weakened its host that at the death of Marcus Aurelius there was simply not enough producing-power to pay the bills." Eighty years of able Antonine rule "could not prevent the Roman populace from degenerating into the very scum of the earth, worthless, vicious, contemptible, sheer human sculch." We may make comparisons and draw analogies, near the end of the twentieth century. (Nock, by the way, wrote an admirable essay on conservatism, never reprinted, so far as I know: his model of a conservative is Lucius Cary, Lord Falkland, the mediator between Charles I and the Parliament.)

The lesson I learnt from Marcus Aurelius is the performance of duty. Take this passage from the Meditations--the Emperor being on a hard Danubian campaign when he set down these lines: "In the morning, when thou risest sore against thy will, summon up this

thought: 'I am rising to do the work of a man. Why then this peevishness, if the way lies open to perform the tasks which I exist to perform, and for whose sake I was brought into the world? Or am I to say I was created for the purpose of lying in blankets and keeping myself warm?'" With that admonition I steel myself on December mornings at my ancestral village.

Everyone who contends against odds in defense of the permanent things is an heir of Marcus Aurelius.

We leap sixteen centuries to approach my third conservative, Samuel Johnson. That unforgettable moralist and critic sometimes is represented as a blustering bigot; actually the political Johnson was a reasonable, moderate, and generous champion of order, quick to sustain just authority, but suspicious of unchecked power. He was at once the friend and the adversary of Edmund Burke. His note on Whigs and Tories, written in 1781, suggests his reasonableness:

A wise Tory and a wise Whig, I believe, will agree. Their principles are the same, though their modes of thinking are different. A high Tory makes government unintelligible; it is lost in the clouds. A violent Whig makes it impracticable; he is for allowing so much liberty to every man, that there is not enough power to govern any man. The prejudice of the Tory is for establishment; the prejudice of the Whig is for innovation. A Tory does not wish to give more real power to Government; but that Government should have more reverence. Then they differ as to the Church. The Tory is not for giving more legal power to the Clergy, but wishes they should have a considerable influence, founded on the opinion of mankind; the Whig is for limiting and watching them with a narrow jealousy.

At this point it is useful to recall that originally the word conservative implied a moderate attitude, an endeavor to find a middle way between extremes. Just that was the mission of Falkland and, sometimes, of Johnson.

Johnson I read at Behemoth University, called by some people Michigan State University. (It was a cow college when I enrolled there.) In morals, the sound sense of Dr. Johnson has been my mainstay; and Rasselas has taught me far more about human beings and humankind's vanities than has Candide.

To Scotland we turn for my fourth conservative, Sir Walter Scott. Through the Waverley Novels, the Wizard of the North disseminated Burke's conservative vision to a public that never would have read political tracts; but Scott's achievement is considerably more than this labor of popularizing political doctrines. For Scott wakes the imagination; he reminds us that we have ancestors and inherit a moral patrimony; he pictures for us the virtues of loyalty, fortitude,

respect for women, duty toward those who will succeed us in time--and all this without seeming didactic. As D. C. Somervell puts it, Scott showed, "by concrete instances, most vividly depicted, the value and interest of a natural body of traditions."

My mother gave me five of Scott's romances for my eighth birthday, and I have been reading Scott ever since. Until fairly recent years, one saw cheap editions of Scott's novels on sale at British railway kiosks; but modern educational approaches are effacing that sort of literary taste. I do not mean to desert Sir Walter: indeed, I shall re-read The Antiquary once I return to my Michigan fastness. The popular influence of the novel departed when television was plumped into the living room of nearly every household in the Western world; I suppose that fewer and fewer young people will read Scott, although books about him continue to be published; but those who do read him may be won to his understanding of the great mysterious incorporation of the human race.

Let us cross the Atlantic now. A Virginian is my fifth exemplary conservative--not George Washington, or George Mason, or Madison, or Monroe, and certainly not Thomas Jefferson; but John Randolph of Roanoke, concerning whom I wrote my first book. Strange to say, Randolph, the enemy of change, was described at some length in my tenth grade American history textbook; I wrote a school paper about him; by 1951, that effort had grown to a book published by the University of Chicago Press, Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in Conservative Thought--today published, in a fuller edition, by Liberty Press.

Randolph's biting wit and extemporaneous eloquence, in the House or the Senate, still ring true against the centralizers, the meddlers in the affairs of distant nations, the demagogues, the men in office who "buy and sell corruption in the gross." Yet it was Randolph's intricate personality and burning emotion, as much as his political perceptions, that drew me to a study of him and of the history of the Southern states. Hugh Blair Grigsby describes Randolph at the Virginia Convention of 1829-1830, when Randolph was not far from death's door:

...It was easy to tell from the first sentence that fell from his lips when he was in fine tune and temper, and on such occasions the thrilling music of his speech fell upon the ears of that excited assembly like the voice of a bird singing in the pause of the storm. It is difficult to explain the influence which he exerted in that body. He inspired terror to a degree that even at this distance of time seems inexplicable. He was feared alike by East and West, by friend and foe. The arrows from his quiver, if not dipped in poison, were pointed and barbed, rarely missed the mark, and as seldom failed to make a rankling wound. He seemed to paralyze alike the mind and the body of his

victim. What made his attack more vexatious, every sarcasm took effect amid the plaudits of his audience.

James Madison and James Monroe, near the end of their tether in 1829, listened closely and fearfully to the formidable Randolph, their heads bowed.

It was my study of this master of rhetoric, this hard hater of cant and sham, this American disciple of Burke, that led me deeper into an understanding of Edmund Burke's mind and heart. "Change is not reform!" Randolph cried to the Virginia Convention; that aphorism I cherish. Would that some chastening Randolph might stride into today's Senate or House! Henry Adams, whose ancestors Randolph denounced, called Randolph of Roanoke "a Saint Michael in politics."

From Southside Virginia we make haste to Salem, in Massachusetts, to encounter my sixth exemplary conservative, Nathaniel Hawthorne. My great aunt Norma thoughtfully gave me her set of Hawthorne's works when I was about nine years old, and I have those volumes still, after reading them through a score of times.

It is significant of the modern temper that for the past three decades, the typical school anthology of American literature has found little space for Hawthorne, though a great deal for Walt Whitman--a disproportion that today, I note, begins to be remedied by some publishers. The anthologists and textbook publishers had sensed the conservatism of Hawthorne, and the flabby democratism of Whitman is obvious enough. Yet it has been Hawthorne, not Whitman, who has been taken very seriously at the higher levels of education and by learned literary critics.

Understanding the reality of sin, Hawthorne was contemptuous of radicals' designs for the perfection of man and society. It was Hawthorne, you may recall, who said that no man was ever more justly hanged than was John Brown of Osawatimie. Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance demolishes American Utopians; his short tale "Earth's Holocaust" ridicules the radicals' fierce endeavor to destroy the civilized past. As did T.S. Eliot, I take Hawthorne for the most moving and enduring of American writers.

A fighting, writing President is my seventh exemplary conservative: Theodore Roosevelt. Once upon a time, when my grandfather took his small grandson to the movies, there happened to appear on the screen, briefly, the face of Roosevelt. My grandfather applauded loudly but solitarily, to my embarrassment. Had I then read Hero Tales from American History, written by Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, I too would have applauded. My grandfather gave me a copy of that book not long later, and I read it most eagerly. How I was stirred, at the age of twelve, by Roosevelt's sketches and vignettes of George Rogers Clark, King's Mountain, the storming of Stony Point, the battle of New Orleans, the death of Stonewall

Jackson, the charge at Gettysburg, Farragut at Mobile Bay, the Alamo! When later I came to know Roosevelt's houses at Oyster Bay--where he ran the United States, summers, from a loft office above a drug store at the principal corners of the village--and in Manhattan, it was as if I were visiting one of my teachers. Much else that Roosevelt wrote has not diminished in vigor. Much that Roosevelt did requires doing all over again.

To apprehend how conservative Roosevelt was, read the venomous chapter about him in that snarling book The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It by Richard Hofstadter, a thoroughgoing Marxist if an unconfessed one. Consider such a passage as this: "The frantic growth and rapid industrial expansion that filled America in his lifetime had heightened social tensions and left a legacy of bewilderment, anger, and fright, which had been suddenly precipitated by the depression of the nineties. His psychological function was to relieve these anxieties with a burst of hectic action and to discharge these fears by scholding authoritatively the demons that aroused them. Hardened and trained by a long fight with his own insecurity, he was the master therapist of the middle classes."

How shocking that a President should be concerned for the middle classes! When Hofstadter sneers with such neurotic malice, one may be quite sure that Theodore Roosevelt was a power for good.

For my eighth conservative, I select that Polish genius who wrote in English, Joseph Conrad. I discovered Conrad early in my high school years; picked up a secondhand set of his works in Salt Lake City during my years as a sergeant; lost that set in our Great Fire of 1975; and now have replaced most of the burnt volumes. I commend to you especially, with an eye to the literature of politics, his novels Under Western Eyes, The Secret Agent, and Nostramo. Of those, the first shows us Russian revolutionary politics, sad and grisly; the second reveals to us the figure of the terrorist, yesteryear and today; the third is the most penetrating study ever written of Latin American politics and character, illustrating Bolivar's mournful observation that whoever tries to establish liberty in Latin America plows the salt sea. Do not neglect Conrad's short stories, particularly "The Informer," which is reprinted in The Portable Conservative Reader.

In Conrad a powerful critical intellect is joined to vast experience of the ways of East and West. The great novelist entertains no illusions about socialism, anarchism, feminism, nihilism, liberalism, or imperialism. Were Conrad, the foe of ideology, writing today--why, he might have difficulty finding a decent publisher, and his novels might be ignored by the mass media reviewers; but happily for his influence, Conrad's reputation was impregably established before the present Holy Liberal Inquisition in publishing and reviewing obtained its unsparing hegemony.

Ninth, I call your attention to Richard Weaver, whom I knew well. According to Ambrose of Milan, it has not pleased God that man should be saved through logic. Richard Weaver would have assented to this, knowing as he did the nature of the average sensual man and the limits of pure rationality. Yet with a high logical power, Weaver undertook an intellectual defense of culture and did what he might to rescue order, justice, and freedom from the perverters of language.

Weaver died before his time, in his room--its walls painted black--at a cheap hotel on the South Side of Chicago. He had lived austere and with dignity, hoping one day to retire to Weaverville, North Carolina, his birthplace. He was a shy little bulldog of a man who detested much in the modern world--with reason. His slim strong book Ideas Have Consequences, published in 1948, was the first gun fired by American conservatives in their intellectual rebellion against the ritualistic liberalism that had prevailed since 1933, and which still aspires to dominion over this nation. In 1948 I was a bookseller; and recognizing promptly the virtue of Ideas Have Consequences, I organized a display of many copies, sold most of them, and invited Weaver to speak to our George Ade Society in Lansing--perhaps the first time Weaver had been asked to speak, outside the University of Chicago. (Although he was no very effective orator, in one year he was voted the most able instructor in the College of the University of Chicago.)

Among philosophers, Plato was Weaver's mentor; and among statesmen, Lincoln. (Although a declared Southerner, in politics Weaver was a conservative Republican.) Such views did not find him favor in the academy, but he persevered, gaining some ground with his second book The Ethics of Rhetoric; and the several volumes of his other essays, published posthumously, have brought a consciousness of enduring truth to many who never saw him or wrote to him. A high consistency and honesty won over, in some degree, even the more hostile of the reviewers of his books.

Some of his closer Chicago friends--their number was not legion--might not see him during the course of an entire year. He never travelled; he endured stoically the ferocious Chicago winters, often wearing two overcoats, one over the other. Once a year he attended a church, and then a high Episcopalian service; the solemnity and mystery of the ritual, strongly though he was attracted by them, overwhelmed his soul: such a feast would last for months. The frugality woven into his character extended even to his very private religion.

No man was less romantic than Richard Weaver--yet none more inveterately attached to forlorn good causes. Vanity he knew not, and he despised the hubris of modern times. Although there exist no heirs of his body, the heirs of his mind may be many and stalwart.

Turn we at last to the gentler sex. Once upon a time I wrote a book entitled The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism; and it would be possible to compile a Portable Conservative Women's Reader, for during the past century there have flourished a good many eminent female conservatives. As my tenth exemplary conservative, then, I designate Freya Stark, the author of several remarkable books of travel in the Levant and Iran. Miss Stark is no politician, but a conservative spirit runs strongly through all her books, particularly her moving volume of essays Perseus in the Wind and her important historical study Rome on the Euphrates. I began reading the books of Miss Stark (or Mrs. Stewart Perowne, as she became eventually) during my years of residence in Scotland, and have venerated her ever since. Her brief essay "Choice and Toleration" is included in The Portable Conservative Reader.

To apprehend how a civilization undoes itself, one cannot do better than to read attentively her Rome on the Euphrates, with its account of the destruction of the Western world's middle classes by Roman taxation, centralization, bureaucracy, and foolish war. History does repeat itself, although always with variations. There must be noted one sentence by Freya Stark that every conservative ought to grave upon his lintel--should he possess a house with a lintel--or at least upon his memory: "Tolerance cannot afford to have anything to do with the fallacy that evil may convert itself to good."

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What an omnium gatherum of people endowed with a conservative turn of thought and impulse! A Roman orator, a Roman emperor, a lexicographer, a Scottish romancer, a Virginia politician, a New England "boned pirate," a rough-riding President, a Polish sea-captain-novelist, a recluse at the University of Chicago, a wanderer in antique lands! Yet it was such who formed my own conservative mind; and their very diversity sufficiently demonstrates that conservatism is no ideology, but rather a complex of thought and sentiment, a deep attachment to the permanent things. Incidentally, I have taken the opportunity to pay tribute to some major figures not discussed at any length in my books, to my shame: President Roosevelt, Dr. Weaver, and Miss Stark.

In the long run, the courses of nations are not determined by the candidates for office or the grandiose administrators whose names bulk large in the daily papers and echo in the television studios; whose names will be quite forgotten, most of them, a decade from now. Napoleon or Pitt, Stalin or Churchill, true, may leave real marks upon the world, for good or ill. Yet it is imagination that governs humankind: so the men and women who alter thought and sentiment are the true movers and shakers of the moral order and the civil social order.

The conservative imagination of the ten people I have presented to you was employed courageously to oppose that disorder which perpetually threatens to reduce the world to chaos. Profiting by their examples, we folk at the end of the twentieth century must rouse ourselves from the apathy of Lotos-land, taking counsel as to how we may defend the permanent things against the wrath of the enemies of order, so fierce and clamorous in our time; or how, at worst, to shore some fragments against our ruin.

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