PREFACE

The writings collected here were delivered originally as public lectures at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C., over a period of fourteen years—from 1980 until the author's death on April 29, 1994. Part of what follows first appeared in two long out-of-print books: *Reclaiming a Patrimony* and *Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written on the Sky*. Much, though, is unique to this book.

Redeeming the Time is intended to be a companion volume to the highly acclaimed *The Politics of Prudence*—another collection of popular Heritage lectures. Together, these two books comprise nearly the complete Kirk lecture series sponsored by that eminent Washington policy institute. Heritage President Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., has said of Kirk's Washington lectures that, "In a city of constant change, Kirk reminded opinion leaders, journalists, legislators, and staffers of prudence and taking the long view." These lectures, Feulner observed, were "masterpieces of clear thought and eternal truth," and insure that "Kirk's influence in Washington will continue to be far greater than many of the transient politicians who descend upon this city, cycle after cycle."

In the pages that follow, Kirk counsels us to direct our energies toward cultural renewal. Arguing that our civilization stands in peril, he exhorts those who believe that life is worth living to address themselves to means by which a restoration of our culture may be achieved.

While the reader of *Redeeming the Time* will detect the immense range of Kirk's interests, he viewed himself principally as an historian of ideas and literary critic. He endeavored "to wake the moral imagination through the evocative power of humane letters." Indeed, he was, above all else, a man of humane letters. As the distinguished literary critic George A. Panichas has pointed out, Kirk's strength of character and sense of moral obligation elevated the man of letters to his true stature—that is, to one who points the way to first principles.

Kirk's role as he saw it was that of "guardian of the Word." Men of letters, teachers, and all who labor in educational vineyards, are entrusted with an almost sacred duty to preserve and transmit as intact as they are able a shared cultural and intellectual patrimony to the generation in ascendance. "We need to remind ourselves," Kirk wrote,

> that men of letters and teachers of literature are entrusted with a social responsibility: they have no right to be nihilists or fantastic or neoterists, because the terms on which they hold their trust are conservative. Whatever the immediate political opinions of the guardians of the Word, his first duty is conservative in the larger sense of that adjective: his work, his end, is to shelter and promulgate an inherited body of learning and myth. The man of letters and teacher of literature have no right to be irresponsible dilettantes or reckless iconoclasts; they are placed in

> their high dignity so that they may preserve the ideas that make all men one.

In 1953, Kirk, recently awarded the degree D.Litt. from St. Andrews University in Scotland and a young professor at Michigan State University, published his magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind*. Before that time social critics like Lionel Trilling could perceive no trace of conservative imagination to challenge the hegemony of liberalism. But Kirk "tossed into the stagnant pond of intellectualism" his *Conservative Mind*, and its waves are still being felt. Kirk's book was reviewed at length in *The New York Review of Books* and *Time*, as well as in countless other publications. Publication of *The Conservative Mind* launched not only one man's distinguished career, but an American political movement.

Kirk, however, did not immediately fancy himself part of a "conservative movement." He wouldn't be pigeonholed by words such as "Right" or "Left"—labels that tend to lead "one into the trap of ideological infatuation." As he observed in his memoir *The Sword of Imagination*, those eminent post-war literary figures who abjured the official liberal ideology and who seldom thought in political categories

> may better be described as the literary party of order. It was order in the soul that chiefly interested them; but they knew, most of them, that the commonwealth too requires principles of order. Some of them were

> willing to be called conservatives, others not; labels are of no great consequence; they were no ideologues, no politicizers of humane letters.

If Kirk joined the lists of the “literary party of order,” his sworn opponents were those adherents of the “literary party of disorder.” Kirk stood forthright against the purveyors of disorder, those “nihilists, fanatic ideologues, and purveyors of violent sensation” who “present us with the image of man unregenerate and triumphant in his depravity.” By the end of the 1950s, due in no small part to Kirk’s efforts, the climate of opinion in America was slowly changing.

Kirk labored in the tiny village of Mecosta, Michigan, far from the centers of “publishing, book reviewing, and literary cocktail parties.” Though he avoided the allure of certain literary circles, by the mid-1950s Kirk was a prolific man of letters. In addition to *The Conservative Mind* and *Randolph of Roanoke*, his first book, Kirk published *A Program for Conservatives* (later entitled *Prospects for Conservatives*), *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, *St. Andrews*, *Academic Freedom*, *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Conservatism*, and *The American Cause*. Additionally, he founded, in collaboration with the publisher Henry Regnery and a few others, the quarterly *Modern Age*—which to this day remains what Kirk intended it to be: “an American protest against the illusions of the age.”

His growing influence was felt abroad as well as at home. Throughout his life, Kirk was numbered among the company of the leading literary figures of Europe. T. S. Eliot, Roy Campbell, Wilhelm Roepke, Wyndham Lewis, Otto von

Habsburg, all were friends and allies, men of letters, as Kirk put it, turned “tailors in the West, doing what they might to stitch together once more that serviceable old suit variously called ‘Christian Civilization,’ ‘Western Civilization,’ ‘North Atlantic Community,’ or ‘the free world.’”

Kirk learned much from contemporary European literary figures—particularly T. S. Eliot. Like his friend Eliot, Kirk, too, “had sworn fealty to the permanent things, understanding that these permanent things are not the creations of men merely.” Of T. S. Eliot, Kirk wrote, “What Eliot’s revolution in literature gave to his age was a renewal of moral imagination—with social consequences potentially.” In his age, Russell Kirk effected a similar revolution in politics and humane letters—with social consequences actually.

By the 1960s, Kirk was an established author and public personality; by the 1980s he was hailed as the father of modern American conservatism and was among the speakers most in demand on college campuses. Kirk lived to see the intellectual movement to which he had contributed so much from its haphazard beginnings become “a popular cause—nay, a high tide in the affairs of men.”

Over the last thirty years, Kirk added more than twenty books to the ones aforementioned, including major works such as *T. S. Eliot and His Age*, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered, Enemies of The Permanent Things*, *The Roots of American Order, America’s British Culture,* and *The Politics of Prudence*. He was also a master in the art of storytelling, particularly of ghostly tales, and could count among his achievements an acclaimed corpus of fiction, including *A Creature of the Twilight*, *Lord of the Hollow Dark*, *The Surly Sullen Bell*, *Watchers*

at the Strait Gate, *The Princess of all Lands*, and *Old House of Fear*. Kirk would note with satisfaction in his 1963 collection *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory*, that "without design or strong exertion, I have fallen into the best of lives, that of the independent man of letters—a dying breed, but one capable still of a shrewd cut or thrust before twilight."

Redeeming the Time is the first collection of Kirk essays to appear posthumously. These essays distill, in prose characteristically lively and graceful, many of the tenets central to Kirk's brand of humane conservatism: the nature of culture, the precariousness of order, justice, and freedom, the true purpose of education, the dangers of rapacious ideology, the importance of beauty, and the centrality of the imagination. Together with its immediate predecessor, *The Politics of Prudence*, one will find this volume an excellent introduction to the thought of this seminal twentieth-century thinker. But for the full depth and sophistication of Kirk's thought on the range of political, literary, and cultural matters he discusses, the reader is encouraged to consult his weightier works, such as the ones already listed.

While Kirk considers here a congery of themes in several disciplines, a thread of continuity nevertheless joins these writings: the patrimony of culture and of order, justice, and freedom that Americans have inherited—but often neglected to renew. Kirk's wide and deep reading made him painfully cognizant that the freedoms we Americans have enjoyed may not be maintained in perpetuity, that our "new order of the ages" may not endure forever. As he cautiously notes in the

second chapter: “It is by no means certain that our present moral and constitutional order is providing sufficiently for its own future. Modern men pay a great deal of attention to material and technological means, but little attention to the instruments by which any generation must fulfill its part in the contract of eternal society.”

It was this task of reflection upon the problem of how to conserve, and then of discerning ways to renew, our cultural patrimony that was central to nearly all of Kirk’s books—and, as the title suggests, it is the primary concern of *Redeeming the Time*.

At the heart of his analysis of the current state of culture is the concern that a proper relationship exist between faith, freedom, and order—with particular attention paid to the question of order. In the early pages of his treatise *The Roots of American Order,* Kirk defines this word “order” as “a systematic and harmonious arrangement—whether in one’s character or in the commonwealth. Also ‘order’ signifies certain duties and the enjoyment of certain rights in a community: thus we use the phrase civil social order.” Before men can live tolerably well with each other, Kirk taught, there must be order.

While for Kirk (as for Simone Weil) “order is the first need of all,” it does not follow that he considers freedom to be a secondary good. Rather, as he states in “The Tension of Order and Freedom in the University,” freedom is intricately bound up with order, they co-exist necessarily in a healthy tension. Order and freedom are not paradoxical, they are the flip-side of the same coin, and so Kirk advances “ordered freedom” as the ideal of the commonwealth.

The glue that holds order and freedom together in healthy tension is, Kirk argues, religion. “[I]t seems to me that a high degree of ordered, civilized freedom is linked closely with religious belief.... If the great troubles of our time teach mankind anything, surely we ought now to recognize that true freedom cannot endure in a society which denies a transcendent order.” For Kirk, the America of the early Republic typified this ideal of a union between order and freedom.

> Our constitutions were established that order might make possible true freedom. Despite all our American talk of private judgment, dissent, and individualism, still our national character has the stamp of respect for the moral order ordained by religion, and for the prescriptive political forms that we, more than any other people in the twentieth century, have maintained little altered. We would work immense mischief to our freedom if we ceased to respect our established order, running instead after an abstract, Jacobin liberty.

If we are to redeem our time, we must seek out imaginative ways to renew our understanding of and commitment to our prescriptive freedoms and our inherited moral and constitutional order. This is certainly a grand challenge, but we are reminded in these pages that “every grand question has to be argued afresh in every generation.”

Kirk is the ablest of guides for those unsure of foot and in need of orientation in this delicate process of cultural renewal. Each of the succeeding chapters addresses a component integral to the process of civil social reinvigoration. For instance, in “Civilization without Religion?” Kirk argues forcefully that “culture can be renewed only if the cult is renewed”; and at the center of the cult is religious belief: “If a culture is to survive and flourish, it must not be severed from the religious vision out of which it arose.” In “The Conservative Purpose of a Liberal Education” he underscores the importance of education in social and personal renewal: “[T]he function of liberal education is to conserve a body of received knowledge and to impart an apprehension of order to the rising generation.” In “Renewing a Shaken Culture” Kirk exhorts the reader to “resist manfully and womanfully the thoughtless centralization of political and economic power.” In “The American Mission” he counsels us to take a fresh look at that “champion of ordered freedom,” Orestes Brownson, who argued that the central problem of politics was the reconciling of authority and liberty, and who discerned that it was this country’s mission “to present to mankind a political model: a commonwealth in which order and freedom exist in a healthy balance or tension.” In “The Case For and Against ‘Natural Law’” Kirk encourages a reconsideration of that much-maligned doctrine, contending that the natural law “is meant for the governance of persons...that we may restrain will and appetite in ordinary walks of life”—and in that way it may have the salutary effect, too, of helping to “form the opinions of those who are lawmakers.” In “Three Pillars of Order” the reader is presented

with eighteenth-century exemplars who resisted fanatic ideology and defended the old moral order against the rebellious innovators of their time.

In the midst of these thoughtful expositions of conservative belief and counsels for reform, Kirk takes issue with a host of enemies of ordered freedom and authentic cultural renewal. “In any age,” he argues in the ensuing pages, “some people revolt against their own inheritance of order.... Near the end of the twentieth century, the number of such enemies to order has become alarming.... To the folk who rebel against their patrimony of moral and constitutional order, that legacy seems a burden—when in truth it is a footing.”

Those “enemies of ordered freedom” drawing particular attention include the libertarians, who “dream of an absolute private freedom” and advance a theory of “ravening liberty”; the multiculturalists, who “would pull down the whole elaborate existing culture of this country in order to make everybody equal—that is equal in ignorance”; the egalitarians, who “would discourage or suppress enterprising talents—which would result in social stagnation”; the technocrats, who “seem calculated to enfeeble the individual reason and to make most of us dependent upon an elite of computer programmers”; the sentimentalists, who “feel” with projected images “that rouse *sentiments* rather than reflections”; the educrats, who consider education to be nothing higher “than an instrument of public policy”; the democratists, who refuse to acknowledge that “the American Constitution is not for export”; the legal positivists, who deny “any source for justice except the commands of the sovereign state”; and the sham architects and perverse literati, who war against the “normative purpose” of art and letters, proffering instead

unparalleled dreariness, uniformity, violence, and servility—a “barrenness of soul and mind.”

This combination of sober reflection, thoughtful analysis, and tempered optimism, or rather hope, make *Redeeming the Time* the perfect guide for those in search of intelligent conservative reform. These essays of diagnosis and prognosis, penned during the last years of Kirk’s life, resonate with the wisdom of the ages, as well as with the wisdom of an aging seer. The reader discouraged by the prospects of returning a modicum of order and justice and freedom to this bent world should turn to the final chapter of this collection. Therein Kirk’s genuine cheerfulness sheds light on the darkness of our cultural landscape. Concurring with Napoleon that “imagination rules the world,” and understanding that we “are not the slaves of some impersonal force called Destiny or History,” Kirk rallies the reader, charging that

> it is not inevitable that we submit ourselves to a social life-in-death of boring uniformity and equality. It is not inevitable that we indulge all our appetites to fatigued satiety. It is not inevitable that we reduce our schooling to the lowest common denominator. It is not inevitable that obsession with creature-comforts should sweep away belief in a transcendent order. It is not inevitable that the computer should supplant the poet.

But how are we to reverse our slide into the darkness of cultural decadence? In the end, Kirk puts his trust in Providence and his hope in the rising generation: that the “children of light may labor with fortitude, knowing that the struggle availeth.”

Thankfully, we are not left to labor alone. Rather, those among us who work to restore our inherited cultural patrimony can look over our shoulders for energy and direction, to those giants who have labored before us. Kirk himself counseled that it is from the memorable dead that we look for “the energy that sustains people in a time of tribulation.” “The order, inner and outer, of our common culture,” he contended, “is defended not by the living merely, but by the valiant dead as well.” Russell Kirk is now counted among those valiant dead who give us energy. The incandescence of his immortal soul shines through this work, and enlightens and emboldens us in our efforts to redeem the time.

--Jeffrey O. Nelson