

It took a polymath of the Western soul to produce Russell Kirk's masterpiece—and that's just what Kirk was

The Mind Behind *The Conservative Mind*

Lee Edwards

The possibility that one person could write *The Conservative Mind*, a sweeping history of conservative thought in America and Great Britain from the mid-eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, seems unlikely. He would have to be a master synthesizer of politics, philosophy, and culture spanning almost two centuries. He would have to possess a transcendent mind like Einstein's that sees connections where others cannot. He would have to have a photographic memory that could call up key passages from dozens of books and authors. He would have to be historian, biographer, and philosopher, all at the same time. He would have to be both fox, knowing everything, and hedgehog, knowing only one big thing—the essence of conservatism.

He would need all these qualities to challenge intellectuals like the leading liberal critic of the 1950s, Lionel Trilling, who wrote that while a conservative or reactionary “impulse” existed here and there, conserva-

tism expressed itself only in “irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.” The reason is simple, Trilling said: “liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition” in America.

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Yet only three years after Trilling's disdainful dismissal of American conservatism, Russell Kirk published *The Conservative Mind*, which documented a tradition inspired by Edmund Burke and sustained over the decades by some of the most brilliant minds in America, from John Adams and Alexander Hamilton to George Santayana and T. S. Eliot. Why did Kirk see the connections when no one else did? Why did this son of a railroad engineer and a poetry-loving waitress, this ex-Army sergeant, this lover of Gothic tales and Stoic philosophy, this assistant professor of history at a Midwest land-grant school write *The Conservative Mind* and not Peter Viereck, Clinton Rossiter, Robert Nisbet, William Henry Chamberlin, or some other prominent author of the day? In point of fact, by reason of his bibliophilist upbringing, his bohemian temperament, and his medieval mind, Russell Kirk was the only person who could have written it.

Every great book is the product not of one person but of many different people, places, and things, of birthplace and schoolroom, of parents and teachers, of lonely hours spent in creation and spirited nights that refresh the mind. Every great book stands atop tall stacks of fat books and thin books, inspiring books and obscure books, novels and histories, poetry and philosophy, all shaping the way a conservative author views life—sometimes optimistically, sometimes skeptically, sometimes somberly, sometimes lightheartedly, but ever looking for the indissoluble link between the living, the dead, and the unborn.

Thus was molded the mind of Russell Kirk. He boldly went where other conservatives dared not go, declaring in the first chapter of *The Conservative Mind* that the core of conservative thought lies in six “canons”: (1) a divine intent, as well as personal conscience, rules society; (2) traditional life is filled with variety and mystery, while most radical systems are characterized by a narrowing conformity; (3) civilized society

requires order and hierarchy; (4) property and freedom are inseparably connected; (5) man must control his will and appetite, knowing that he is governed more by emotion than reason; and (6) society must change, but slowly. These canons also limned the mind of Russell Kirk.

That Kirk was guided by these principles, especially the idea of “civilized order,” is clear from his first major essay, published at the age of sixteen. The occasion was a 1936 national competition sponsored by *Scholastic*, the high school weekly. Kirk won first prize for “Mementos,” which described the keepsakes of both sides of his family—a silver-mounted pistol carried in the old Michigan lumber camps, enormous earrings made of '49 gold, antique toys, glass slippers, a music box that had been to the Klondike—and explained their social and historical significance.

Here was the future historian, sifting through papers and records, selecting the relevant and rejecting the ephemeral, asking pertinent questions, displaying an impressive command of the English language, all undertaken *sans* parent or teacher. Already in evidence was Kirk the independent yet philosophically grounded conservative who would write *The Conservative Mind* without the help or guidance of a faculty adviser or an academic committee.

“Mementos” did not spring fully blown from Russell Kirk's youthful mind. It flowed from a childhood and adolescence full of books whose consumption was encouraged by his mother, Marjorie Rachel Andrew Kirk, who presented Russell, when barely seven, with secondhand sets of Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, and Sir Walter Scott. He devoured them all.

Even more important to his intellectual development was his self-educated grandfather Frank Pierce, whose bookcases were full of sets of Thomas Babington Macaulay, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain. One Christmas, Pierce gave his



Kirk almost single-handedly vested modern conservatism with a history and a tradition

precocious grandson copies of Hendrik Willem van Loon's *Story of Mankind* and H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* (whose socialist, anti-Christian theory of history Kirk would come to reject). On Pierce's library table were copies of *The Bookman* and *The Literary Digest*. All were accessible to the young bibliophile, who developed an ability to recall sizable passages of whatever he read.

For thirteen years, beginning in 1922, Kirk attended public schools in Plymouth, Michigan, twenty miles west of Detroit, whose educational aim was not yet corrupted by John Dewey. By the time he entered junior high school, young Kirk was an accomplished writer, owing to his critical study of literary giants. He learned how to form sentences and give flesh to people and situations. The social activities of his fellow students for the most part bored him: "I came into young manhood with leisure enough to reflect upon the larger meanings of existence."

As Kirk writes in his memoir, *The Sword of Imagination*, Plymouth was an old-fashioned "tranquil town" with tree-shaded

streets and a square on the New England model. There were about three thousand residents and a single town marshal—no one locked their doors, and families entertained themselves without radio or television. The Kirks lived in a prefabricated bungalow-style house sold by Sears and Roebuck. His father, Russell Andrew Kirk, was a railroad engineman who had left school before the sixth grade and read only newspapers. His mother was a reader of good poetry who had been a waitress in her father's railroad restaurant.

Place was always important to Kirk. Plymouth and then Mecosta, in the heart of Michigan's lake-filled stump country, were permanent places for Kirk. "For no matter how far a man strays," he wrote, "it is well that his home should remain a place where his ancestors lie buried." Kirk loved Mecosta, which he visited each summer as a child and where he settled with his wife and four daughters.

Kirk's American roots ran deep. He grew up among his mother's family, the Pierces and Johnsons, and the name of Abraham

Pierce (or Peirce), their first American ancestor, appears on the tax rolls of Plymouth Colony in 1623. The history of the Pierce family reveals no famous men or women, but farmers and carpenters—and one obscure poet—who traveled westward from New England, then to upper New York, afterward into southwestern Michigan, and finally to Mecosta County and its lumber regions. It was Grandmother Eva Pierce who gave young Russell a “lively” five-hundred-page history of the descendants of Abraham Pierce, which opened the boy’s eyes to Edmund Burke’s “contract of eternal society’ that joins generation to generation and man to the divine.”

The Pierces’ idea of the divine was unconventional—a piety divorced from institutional Christianity, “Quaker-like in its reliance upon the dictates of conscience and private judgment.” It allowed for séances and other manifestations of spiritualism. Various apparitions came and went (occasionally dropping in on young Russell) in the clapboard Mecosta house until it burned down in 1975. Although no member of the family had been baptized for many years or attended church, Russell and his little sister were encouraged to attend Sunday school. But to the highly rational, even supercilious, young man “the well-meaning atmosphere” of the nearby evangelical chapel was deficient “in taste, imagination, and learning.” He soon declined to attend services, rejecting his family’s belief that an “Omniscience” governed this world and defending atheism against his grandmother and great-aunts with “a Scottish or Puritanical tendentiousness.” The family predicted that Russell would shed such notions as he grew older, prompting him to deny hotly any such possibility. The prediction would be fulfilled decades later when, shortly before his marriage to the devoutly Catholic Annette Courtemanche, Russell Kirk was received into the Catholic Church.

Praising famous men

Politics fascinated Russell Kirk his whole life. The Kirks subscribed to the *Detroit Times*, the *Detroit News*, and the *Detroit Free Press*, whose political stories and columns Russell read avidly. During the latter years of President Herbert Hoover’s administration and the early years of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s, the young high school student “ceased to be a political ignoramus,” aligning himself with the prudential policies of the former. In what he called “the principal radical act of his life,” he pulled down a big photograph of FDR that the superintendent of schools had posted on the bulletin board, tore it in half, and flung it in the trash can. Kirk does not recount what punishment if any he received.

As he neared graduation from Plymouth High School, young Kirk was uncertain about his future until one day the principal asked him, “What are you going to do when you graduate?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Why don’t you apply for a scholarship at Michigan State College?”

Not wishing to be rude, although little interested in higher education, Kirk said yes and to his surprise won a scholarship, arriving at Michigan State in September 1936 at the age of seventeen. Over the next four years he befriended a small group of thoughtful undergraduates and fell in with a few professors “possessed of learning and common sense.” He was most influenced by John Clark, who taught literary criticism and encouraged Kirk to write for serious quarterlies like *College English* and the *South Atlantic Quarterly*.

In his award-winning biography, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, Bradley Birzer carefully examines Kirk’s first two collegiate essays, “Tragedy and the Moderns” and “Jefferson and the Faithless.” In the former, Kirk challenged the notion that “a cynical and mechanical world no longer allowed the

development or manifestation of real heroism or tragedy.” While “tragedy has changed since” Sophocles and Shakespeare, Kirk believed that a person of genius “would arise in our age” and serve “as a nexus between the older understanding and a newer perception of things.” Throughout his life, Birzer writes, Kirk would strive to recognize such persons and wrote acclaimed books about two of them—Edmund Burke and T. S. Eliot.

“Jefferson and the Faithless” was an analysis of writers who claimed the mantle of Jeffersonianism, including H. L. Mencken, whom Kirk rejected as a follower of Jefferson. Where Mencken disdained the common man, for example, Jefferson trusted in the “ultimate righteousness of the masses.” Where Mencken scoffed at the Anglo-Saxon heritage, Jefferson believed that “a democracy could not exist without that heritage.” Where Mencken disparaged popular education, Jefferson was its leading proponent. A true Jeffersonian, Kirk wrote, “must have a faith in the soul, in the vision, and even in the very purpose of the Common Man.” Anticipating a central theme of *The Conservative Mind*, he roundly criticized the “collective action” of the New Deal that breeds “corruption and waste” and argued that only the spirit of Jeffersonianism “is able to restrain [its] evils.” Collective action without liberty, he warned, in a vivid phrase, “is like a quicksand hidden by green grass.”

Short of cash and unwilling to borrow from family and friends, Kirk emulated Samuel Johnson and began a lifelong practice of writing for money—producing a flood of essays, articles, and reviews that often won prizes and enabled the young writer to survive. “Wrapping his poverty about him as if it were a cloak,” as Kirk later recalled, he ate peanut butter and crackers in his room and made himself the “George Gissing of East Lansing.” (Gissing was an eccentric late-nineteenth-century novelist who began life as a socialist and ended an archconservative,

writing such arresting works as *The Nether World* and *New Grub Street*.) For all his poverty, Kirk began buying books old and new, eventually accumulating a library of several thousand volumes, long excerpts of which he quoted in *The Conservative Mind*. A particular favorite was the *Meditations* of the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, which he kept by his bedside until his final days.

Kirk finds his touchstone

By 1940 and the end of his four years at Michigan State College, it seemed to the restless Kirk that he had spent a lifetime taking useless courses and escorting visitors each summer around Henry Ford’s old home, now a museum where he was a guide. What next? Graduate study was a possibility, and Kirk, normally indifferent about his future, applied for scholarships to Pennsylvania State and Duke. The latter waived tuition and offered a stipend of \$200, more money than the young scholar had ever seen at one time.

While earning a master’s degree at Duke, Kirk fell in love with Southern culture, traveling often from the tobacco fields of North Carolina to such historic cities as Richmond, Virginia, and Charleston, South Carolina. He wrote and read extensively in Southern literature, especially the Southern Agrarians. From them, according to Birzer, Kirk received reinforcement that “society is something more than the Gross National Product; that the country lane is healthier than the Long Street; that more wisdom lies in Tradition than in Scientism; that Leviathan is a devourer, not a savior.”

In later years Kirk would often refer to himself as a “Northern Agrarian,” but he never flew the Confederate flag at his home, Piety Hill. In the antebellum period, Mecosta was a regular stop on the Underground Railroad that carried Southern slaves to freedom

in Canada. In *The Roots of American Order*, Kirk praises President Lincoln's "successful struggle to maintain the Union. To that cause he rendered up the last full measure of devotion." No Southern Agrarian would so acclaim the Great Emancipator.

While writing his master's thesis on the wildly eccentric but eloquent nineteenth-century Southern congressman John Randolph of Roanoke, Kirk found time to reread Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, and Irving Babbitt, remarking on their cultural similarities. He wrote his best friend, William McCann, in October 1940 that he was thinking about writing "a book of biographical sketches of the Old Republicans" or perhaps a long biography of one of Randolph's republican allies. In this letter, written almost a decade and a half before the publication of *The Conservative Mind*, we find for the first time Kirk contemplating a book about conservatives.

But he needed a central character. He would find the ideal conservative while writing *John Randolph of Roanoke*, although it would not be Randolph himself. Instead, Kirk would be captivated by Edmund Burke, British politician, political philosopher, and "great Whig," who as a member of Parliament sympathized with the cause of the American colonists during the American Revolution and later warned his fellow Englishmen, and the world, about the sanguinary dangers of the French Revolution.

Kirk was drawn to Burke because, as the British philosopher Roger Scruton put it, Burke was engaged throughout his life "in a continuous pursuit of justice, and valued order, tradition and the conservative instinct, largely because they prevent the massive injustices which ensue when men take it on themselves to manage their own destiny."

Kirk described Burke as "the founder" of American conservatism and said, "If conservatives would know what they defend, Burke is their touchstone." He noted his impact

on figures like John Randolph, who said of Burke, "He is the Newton of political philosophy." But any ambition to write about Burke was set aside in December 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. In August 1942 the U.S. Army dispatched twenty-four-year-old Russell Kirk to the Dugway Proving Ground, a chemical-weapons-testing camp located in the salt flats of Utah, where, like the Desert Fathers centuries before, he thought and read and wrote about the meaning of life.

Two events during World War II, according to Birzer, permanently affected Kirk's view of America and Western civilization: the internment of Japanese Americans and the dropping of atomic bombs on two Japanese cities, killing several hundred thousand civilians. He saw the internment as a consequence of unrestrained nationalism and progressivism, asking, "How many liberals protested?" As for the atomic weapons, he was not moved by President Truman's rationale that using them saved a million American lives that would have been lost in any invasion of Japan, as well as a like number of Japanese. "The knell of civilization has been sounded," he wrote to McCann.

The real conservative, he later wrote in *A Program for Conservatives*, "can urge upon his nation a policy of patience and prudence. A 'preventive' war, whether or not it might be successful in the field—and that is a question much in doubt—would be morally ruinous to us." This attitude would temper *The Conservative Mind* and Kirk's politics for the rest of his life, leading him to support, for example, the noninterventionism of presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan in the 1990s. It did not, however, dilute his enthusiasm for the militantly anticommunist Barry Goldwater, whose 1964 presidential run he strongly supported in his syndicated newspaper column and for whom he ghostwrote two speeches.

Into the academy

Discharged from the Army in 1946, Kirk returned to Plymouth and Mecosta, uncertain of the future, waiting as was his custom for a door or a window to open. He was rewarded for his patience. Sitting in an East Lansing “hash house,” he was approached by a history professor whose best student he had been before the war.

“Russell! What are you doing these days?”

“Nothing, sir.” It was the same laconic answer he had given his high school principal a decade before.

“Come to my office,” commanded Professor Kimber.

The next day Russell Kirk agreed to teach a course on the history of civilization, mostly to returning veterans “who now professed a thirst for knowledge” and whose thirst could be slaked through the GI Bill.

There followed two years of apparent intellectual stasis. Because Kirk did not record his thoughts in a daily diary, as he did while in the Army, we must piece together from the available correspondence how the idea for a book about America’s conservative tradition took form and blossomed. Having neither the taste nor the talent for faculty politics, Kirk concentrated on his Michigan State classes and his “studies” into conservatism on both sides of the Atlantic. In *The Sword of Imagination*, Kirk admits that he felt no strong urge “to linger in the Academy,” but what other practical prospect did he have?

Meanwhile, he and his friend Adrian Smith established an oasis in the East Lansing desert, opening a used book store they named the Red Cedar Bookshop. It lasted for two years—“a bold and pleasant venture”—until Kirk left for Scotland. Another civilizing enterprise was the George Ade Society, named for the Indiana humorist and composed of old friends like Bill McCann and John Clark and new ones as well. They could have been called “the East Lansing Inklings,” after the

British group headed by J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, for the Ade Society included established writers like the poet A. J. M. Smith and the folklore authority Richard Dorson. Among the conservatives who spoke to the group were Richard Weaver, author of the seminal *Ideas Have Consequences*, and Ross J. S. Hoffman, the noted Burke scholar. Burke was never far from Kirk’s mind, he later admitted: his working title for a possible book about conservatives was “The Heirs of Burke.”

During this period he wrote comparatively little, publishing only three serious articles: an essay against conscription for *The South Atlantic Quarterly*; an essay about James Fenimore Cooper for *College English*; and an article about General George Marshall for *Conservative Voice*. But he built up a backlog of ideas about the role of conservatism in a turbulent century in which the center seemed to be coming apart. Echoing Lincoln, he wrote in his memoirs that “there was needed most urgently, by the Fifties, a renewed preference for the old and tried, against the new and untried.”

The need for “a serious book” about conservatism had seemed to Kirk, even when he was an undergraduate, so obvious that he had assumed “the existence of a number of writers at work upon conservative studies.” Yet the years passed and no such book was published, and so he decided to undertake the task himself. But could he sustain the necessary intellectual discipline, conduct the formidable research, and write such a serious work at Michigan State College while teaching history to hundreds of students who could barely write their name, let alone an essay on *Democracy in America*?

Fortune, or perhaps Providence is a better word, appeared one day in the shape of a slim but elegant volume about St. Andrews, the university and the town in Scotland. It was by Sir D’Arcy Thompson, who wrote that St. Andrews “has been, for better or

worse, a town of scholars these five hundred years—yea, and for some centuries besides; once upon a time it was a town for kings and cardinals, and monkish saints and hermits came hither more, much more, than a thousand years ago.” Scholars, kings, hermits, all wrapped up in a thousand years of history—it was an irresistible combination to Kirk, with his Scottish ancestry and love of Scottish authors Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson.

He wrote to the secretary of the university asking whether he might be admitted as a research student while retaining a teaching post at Michigan State. A brief form was sent. He filled it out and was duly admitted as a candidate for a degree in doctor of letters, the university’s highest arts degree. He received a modest grant from the American Council of Learned Societies and, ironically, a monthly stipend of \$75 through the GI Bill, an offspring of Leviathan. He selected as the subject of his doctoral dissertation—what else?—the thought of Edmund Burke. But almost immediately he expanded the scope of the dissertation to a study of American and British conservative thought from Burke to the present. His saturnine title was *The Conservatives’ Rout*, which remained the title for nearly four years until shortly before publication of *The Conservative Mind*.

From Eigg to Ara Coeli

Great books are written in many different ways. Some authors write a few hours at a time, usually upon rising, some all day with short breaks for a sandwich and coffee (and sometimes something stronger). Some write with pen and pencil, others by typewriter or personal computer. Some write in the morning, some in the evening. In a work of nonfiction, writers research first and then write. Some write and then rewrite and then rewrite again. Some writers can produce

only a few hundred words a day; others pour forth several thousand words daily.

The Conservative Mind was a peripatetic book, written on the go in a variety of places, Kirk recalled: “in a but-and-ben snuggled under the cliffs of Eigg; in one of the ancient towers of Kellie Castle, looking out to the Forth; in my great-grandfather’s house in the stump-country of Michigan; among the bogs of Sligo in the west of Ireland; upon the steps of Ara Coeli, in Rome; at Balcarres House, where what Burke calls ‘the unbought grace of life’ still abides.”

Home base was the ancient St. Andrews mansion of Professor John Williams, Kirk’s academic “adviser,” with whom he discussed everything but his doctoral dissertation. Williams knew that Kirk “was writing about Burke, of whom the professor approved, and that sufficed.” Week by week, chapter by chapter, the dissertation grew but remained unread, until one day after a year of agreeable visits and whiskeys and sodas, Professor Williams remarked, “Russell, I hate typescript. I know from our talks that you are the master of your subject. Why don’t you simply take all those pages back to your rooms? When your book is published, I’ll read it with pleasure.”

Meanwhile, Kirk bought many rare books relevant to his thesis in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dublin, and London, as well as at auctions in Fife and Angus. He stretched his legs as well as his mind by walking many miles in Scotland and Ireland—Burke’s home—as well as in France, Switzerland, and Italy. Between these expeditions, he returned to St. Andrews, where he wrote diligently and without guidance of any sort, save his own imagination. The old town seemed to work on him magically. As he put it in *The Sword of Imagination*, he “wrote with a speed and a vigor, his brain full of concepts, that seemed almost to come from a source outside himself.”

In early 1952, after more than three years of reading and writing but little rewriting,

Russell Kirk finished his “prolonged essay” on conservative thought in the line of Burke, which he submitted to three learned men: T. M. Knox, the distinguished professor of philosophy and later vice chancellor of St. Andrews; W. L. Burn, the Durham University historian and author of *The Age of Equipoise*; and Professor Williams, who consented at last to read his protégé’s work once it was bound. In the author’s words, “They found it good.”

Inspiring the conservative mind

What had he wrought? An intellectual history-cum-biography of the most influential conservatives in the English-speaking world, connecting their words and works in a seamless web of Burkean conservatism. It was a work of inspiration as well as scholarship. It was a discovery of an intellectual tradition long overlooked and even forgotten by historians, conservative as well as liberal. It summed up, in one book, the thought of Burke, John Adams, Scott, Coleridge, Tocqueville (the only non-Anglophone intellectual), Hawthorne, Calhoun, Disraeli, Henry Adams, Babbitt, More, Santayana, and Eliot, among others, offering such luminous insights as:

- Conservatism never is more admirable than when it accepts changes that it disapproves, with good grace, for the sake of a general conciliation; and the impetuous Burke, of all men, did most to establish that principle.
- Whenever Bentham considered a received opinion, he asked, “Is it true?” while Coleridge confronted with the same opinion, asked, “What does it mean?” This is the legacy of Burke—never condemning prejudices because they *are* prejudices, but examining them as the collective verdict of the human

species, and endeavoring to make clear the latent meaning in them.

- None apprehended better than Burke and Tocqueville the idea of nationality and the eternal union of all generations of mankind; but the people, or masses, do not live a mystical, beneficent existence somehow independent of parties, passions, and the ordinary failings of humanity. The people do not think or act uninfluenced by ideas and leaders. Without ideas and leaders, for that matter, a people cannot truly be said to exist; in the absence of such a leaven, the people subsist only as an amorphous mass of loosely cohering atoms, a tapioca-pudding state, which social planners contemplate with equanimity.
- Somehow our conservative leaders must contrive to reconcile individualism (which sustained nineteenth-century life at the same time it starved the soul of the nineteenth century) with the sense of community that inspired Burke and Adams. If conservatives cannot redeem the modern masses from the sterile modern mass-mind, then a miserable collectivism which impoverishes both soul and body impends upon Britain and America—the collectivism that now has deluged Europe east of the Elbe and the Austrian Alps, the collectivism (as Orwell wrote) of “the stream-lined men who think in slogans and talk in bullets.”

Kirk ends *The Conservative Mind* with these galvanizing words: “Conservatives must prepare society for Providential change, guiding the life that is taking form into the ancient shelter of Western and Christian civilization. For this, they will require the vision of Burke, the common sense of Adams, the courage of Randolph, the tolerance of Tocqueville, the resolution of Calhoun, the imagination of Disraeli, the

stern justice of [James Fitzjames] Stephen, the catholic learning of More. Democracy in some form will endure. Whether it is to be a democracy of degradation or a democracy of elevation, lies with the conservatives.”

The art of the possible

Alfred Knopf, whom Kirk had met on one of his journeys, wanted to publish his dissertation. This pleased the author exceedingly, Knopf being one of the oldest and most distinguished publishers in America. But when a senior Knopf editor said that the work was too long and would have to be cut “ruthlessly,” perhaps by as much as seven hundred manuscript pages, Kirk immediately turned to the conservative publisher Henry Regnery, who liked everything about the manuscript, including its length of 175,000 words. Regnery’s only hesitation was the title. He thought *The Conservatives’ Rout* was too pessimistic and began an exchange of possible alternatives that included *Conservative Ideas*, *The Conservatives’ Course*, and *The Conservative Tradition*.

Finally, on December 1, 1952, Kirk wrote Regnery that he was hard at work amending *The Conservative Mind*, “for such, pending your approval, I am calling the book.” Regnery responded quickly that he agreed with Kirk that “*The Conservative Mind* would be a good title.” Indeed, it would be the title of one of the most influential intellectual works of the twentieth century, deemed “eloquent” by the *New York Times*, “brilliant” by the *Chicago Tribune*, “a landmark” by *Fortune*, and a work that restores the “full inheritance of the word ‘conservative’” by *Commonweal*. Rejecting the criticism of fellow liberals, Ralph Gilbert Ross wrote in the *Partisan Review* that *The Conservative Mind*, “makes a monumental contribution toward clarifying the position of the conservatives in modern society.”

Kirk meant his book to be a guide to politics as “the art of the possible, as far removed from the varieties of anarchism as from varieties of socialism and of liberalism.” He hoped it might open eyes to a central concept of politics—that “the claims of freedom and the claims of order may be kept in a healthy tension, avoiding extremes.”

He expected it to affect public opinion, but its success exceeded his highest hopes. It soon appeared on the desks of political administrators, legislators, leaders of parties. It began to work as a catalyst in “the recrudescence of a conservative polity—or so, later, the author would be told by the mighty, even presidents of the United States,” he recalled. It provided the conservative movement with its name, for heretofore conservatives had called themselves individualists, classical liberals, Jeffersonians, but rarely conservatives. Robert Nisbet wrote Kirk that with one blow he had broken the barriers erected by America’s liberal dominations and powers. In a retrospective essay some forty years after *The Conservative Mind* first appeared, David Frum argued that Kirk was not so much a historian as “a visionary, almost a prophet” who argued that “conservatism was above all a *moral* cause: one devoted to the preservation of the priceless heritage of Western civilization.”

So it was, wrote Kirk in his memoirs, that *The Conservative Mind*, working through a kind of intellectual osmosis and popularized through the mass media, “helped alter the climate of political and moral opinion in America.” Personally, it freed Russell Kirk from the chains of university life, enabling him to embark on a career as an independent writer and lecturer, becoming an acknowledged Master of Letters. And it all began when a young unknown professor at a Michigan cow college decided, because no one else had, to write a history about an intellectual tradition in America that most scholars insisted did not exist. †