

way. One of the few good things about the lit biz is that it's only the good stuff that matters; the rest is forgotten quickly enough.

The work of both these men, however dissimilar and even contradictory in origin and impulse, is likely to remain with us for a long time.

David R. Slavitt is a poet living in Philadelphia.

An American Burke

by Paul T. Hornak

Collected Letters of
John Randolph of Roanoke to
Dr. John Brockenbrough,
1812-1833

edited by Kenneth Shorey
New Brunswick, NJ:
Transaction Books; \$28.95

John Randolph (1773-1833) survives in America's footnotes as a colorful contrarian, and the Gore Vidal school of historiography pants at his duel with Henry Clay and his taste for opium. A master rhetorician, he left a long list of choice barbs, nearly all concocted on the spur of the moment. James Kilpatrick characterized the errant Judge Alcee Hastings using Randolph's swipe at Edward Livingston: "He is a man of splendid abilities, but utterly corrupt. Like rotten mackerel by moonlight, he both shines and stinks." But to most the senator from southern Virginia who argued for slavery and against westward expansion is as dead as his causes. Of the two biographies remaining in circulation, one is by a sworn enemy, Henry Adams. The other, favorable treatment of his life is by Russell Kirk, series editor of *Transaction's Library of Conservative Thought*, of which this collection is the premier volume. Edited by former *National Review* critic Kenneth Shorey, the Randolph letters to John Brockenbrough, a physician and banker, should if nothing else further the quirky Southerner's temperamental reputation. Illness was a governing factor all his adult life. No one knows for sure what disease he contracted at age 19, but it ended his romance with a Richmond belle, turned him grotesquely lean, and bent his taste to

crackers and malt liquor for days at a time. Brockenbrough's medical background no doubt explains why these letters read like a catalog of ailments. "I have followed your advice with sensible benefit," Randolph writes from the backwoods of Roanoke in 1827, "but nothing seems to relieve the anxiety, distress, and languor to which I am by turns subjected, or the pains, rheumatic or gouty, that are continually flying about me." Diarrhea, influenza, coughs, limps, depression: he was sick more than he was well. Yet he delivers the litany of his disease with the imaginative flair of an actor, as though craving applause as well as pity from his audience of one. Nor is sickbed art the only charm of these letters. They complain with equal vigor of miry roads, shabby inns, congressional wags, and strutting bumpkins, a Hogarth backdrop for the great traditionalist's paeans to the vanishing world of the genteel planter.

How much of the wail he loosed against the tide of change was an echo of debility? Although Randolph abundantly documents the ills of a body bilious and melancholic, his quick and capacious mind, sanguine always, shines in every letter. They show him to be a perfect early American example of what Kirk refers to as "the political and moral attitude called conservatism." The attitude, he writes, does not spring from theories, but from "custom, convention, continuity. . . . Being disdainful of ideology, the conservative cast of mind has no presumptuous crib, the fond creation of some Terrible Simplifier, to which the devo-



tee may repair whenever in doubt." Dragging himself to Congress through 30 years of declining health, Randolph consistently fought for limited government, the rule of law, and the ancient prerogatives of property. Even his abolitionist opponents acknowledged he was a good man. He defended slavery because there were "200 mouths look-

ing up to me for food . . . it would be more difficult to abandon them to the cruel fate which our laws would consign them, than to suffer with them." The letters, of course, brief as they are, truncate Randolph's already Byzantine reasoning, but they suggest the depth of his thought and its sometimes surprising turns. To quote a few:

American Democracy

"We hug our lousy cloaks around us, take another chaw of tubbaker, float the room with nastiness, or ruin the grate and fire-irons, where they happen not to be rusty, and try conclusions upon constitutional points."

Charity

"There is not a human being that I would hurt if it were in my power; not even Bonaparte."

The West

"Surely that must be the Yahoo's paradise, where he can get dead drunk for the hundredth part of a dollar."

Patriotism

"A mighty precious thing when it costs nothing, but the mass of mankind think it a very foolish thing when it curtails their self-indulgence."

Old Age

"That 'pliability of man's spirit' which yields him up to illusions of the ideal world, is gone from me for ever."

As Kirk says, the impression we form is of a peculiar psychology, a "cast of mind" backward-looking, negative about human possibility but positive about human worth, clear-eyed, alert, fiercely independent. Future books in the series will introduce or reintroduce the writings of the moralist W.H. Mallock, the Victorian jurist James Fitzgerald Stephen, and others, to a reading public raised on Rooseveltian liberalism. It will be interesting to see whether such unfashionable names "take" in times that label William F. Buckley Jr. a fascist. The choice of Randolph to open—perhaps the word is ignite—the series is excellent strategy. Like Buckley, where he fails to persuade he always dazzles; he is compellingly memorable, and memory is, as someone has said, the first step to understanding.

Paul T. Hornak has written for The New York Times, National Review, and Reason.

The Secular Imagination

by Gregory J. Sullivan

Lionel Trilling

by Stephen L. Tanner

Boston: Twayne Publishers

Under the tyranny of ideology that is a grim fact of contemporary life in university English departments, it is tempting to reflect on the career of Lionel Trilling (1905-1975) with an uncritical wistfulness. It is to Stephen Tanner's credit that his astute and balanced introductory study resists such a temptation; for however much Trilling's criticism remains something of a beacon during the dark night of deconstruction, his work contains severe flaws.

Trilling's sensibility was shaped in large measure by the humanist tradition of Matthew Arnold, from whom he learned a scholarly disinterestedness and a prudent aloofness from the brawls of partisan politics. What is more, Trilling's preoccupations were determined by his Arnold-like humanism. "His themes," Tanner says, "are relatively few and remain surprisingly constant from beginning to end of his career: literature as a criticism of life; the problematic but vital relationship between self and society; the perils of oversimplifying human nature and experience; the dangers of overweening intellect and will; and the complexity and pain of living the moral life."

Trilling's concerns, then, were of the highest order; his treatment of them, moreover, was unfailingly serious and expressed in what Tanner aptly calls "a style of extreme tact and judiciousness." Nevertheless, the moral and intellectual context in which Trilling developed these themes is embodied in the revolutionary trinity of Rousseau, Marx, and, above all, Freud. This devotion is not at all surprising; like many of his contemporaries, Trilling was raised in a secular milieu—"It is difficult," Tanner observes, "to think of Trilling as Jewish at all"—an experience that left gaps in his literary and cultural perceptions. Tanner is to the point:

The most significant omission in Trilling's work is his failure, despite his historical

predisposition, to recognize the vital significance of the continuing secularization of culture and the gradual withdrawal of God that have characterized the West since the seventeenth century.

The truth is that Trilling was a comfortable denizen of the Secular City, and he dutifully paid his obeisances, at one time or another, to its gods. Freud, of course, was for Trilling the most illustrious figure in the pantheon; and it is to what Tanner calls a "selective and idealized Freud" that he turned time and again for moral and cultural authority. But *Civilization and Its Discontents*, to choose a text that Trilling revered, is hardly the definitive source of a coherent point of view.

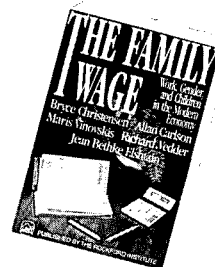
The secular world view lacks any metaphysical explanation of man's aboriginal depravity. To be sure, Trilling was keenly aware of our fundamentally tragic nature. His humanism, however, contained a marked tendency toward a utopianism that is bereft of any acknowledgment of ineradicable human

frailty. Trilling was thus stranded by his rejection of either heaven in the next world or heaven on earth. This inherent tension is particularly conspicuous in his political liberalism. For instance, in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), he indicates that the critic's objective is "to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty." It goes without saying that Trilling's best criticism—including *The Opposing Self* (1955), *Beyond Culture* (1965), and *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972)—fulfills this function, and he remains perhaps liberalism's best internal critic. The problem is that a decade or so after he wrote his famous preface, liberalism was splintering, "its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility" descending into nihilistic chaos. In retrospect, Trilling was defending a tradition in which the concept of ultimate things led ineluctably to the Molotov cocktail.

Gregory J. Sullivan is a graduate student at Villanova University.

"A groundbreaking and timely investigation of an economic concept once central to American social thought. For anyone who has wondered why the family is now under such financial pressure, this book will answer a host of questions."

— Robert Nisbet



The Family Wage: Work, Gender, and Children in The Modern Economy A fascinating collection of essays that will help Americans better understand the current economic challenges to family life. Send for your copy today!

☐ **YES**, please send me _____ copies of **The Family Wage: Work, Gender, and Children in the Modern Economy** at \$11.50 each (postage and handling included).

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Send this coupon and your check made out to The Rockford Institute to:
The Rockford Institute, 934 N. Main St., Rockford, IL 61103