

thing much more likely to occur if policymakers read *Noah's Choice*. □

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## The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict

by Russell Kirk

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company • 1995 • 514 pages • \$34.99

Reviewed by William J. Watkins, Jr.

Russell Kirk (1918–1994) was proof of the power of individuals. Kirk's influence on the blossoming of contemporary American conservative thought cannot be measured. His 30 books on everything from economics to history will inspire their readers for years to come.

Kirk's final work, completed shortly before his death in April 1994, ranks among his best. *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* contains his entertaining and informative ruminations spanning the 1920s to the 1990s. It is a personal chronicle of tumultuous times that anyone interested in ideas should not miss.

How Russell Kirk, enemy of omnipotent government, became interested in ideas and began his higher education is indeed ironic. As his secondary education drew to a close, Kirk felt he had had enough formal learning. Fortunately, he was persuaded by his high school principal to apply for a scholarship to Michigan State College. So as not to appear rude to the principal, Kirk applied for and won a scholarship that he really didn't want. "Off he went to college against his will," writes Kirk in the third person that he uses throughout the work, "having nothing better to do during the Roosevelt Recession in 1936. . . ." Hence, we can credit the New Deal and its ruinous economic policies as the impetus behind the career of one of this century's great men of letters.

The year after he finished his formal education with a Doctor of Letters degree from St. Andrews in Scotland, Kirk pub-

lished his most influential book, *The Conservative Mind*. He went on to become one of the intellectual leaders of the conservative movement as he clearly delineated its principles. The America of the 1950s was still very much FDR's America. Voices of opposition to statist policies were not welcomed, much less understood.

Kirk describes the nomination of Dwight Eisenhower by the Republican convention in 1952 as an enormous setback for conservatism. Had the delegates not betrayed Senator Robert A. Taft, whom Kirk describes as the true leader of the party at the time, "the United States might have entered early upon far-reaching conservative measures. . . ." So instead of the repeal of the New Deal, the United States got the interstate highway system. Defeats of principle like this are one reason why Kirk almost titled *The Conservative Mind, The Conservatives' Rout* instead.

The publication of *The Conservative Mind* was a watershed event. It helped give coherence to an inchoate opposition to the fads of modernity. The book sparked debate and revived interest in such seminal thinkers as John C. Calhoun and John Adams. Now in its seventh edition, the book continues to inspire thought in new readers as well as old. It is destined to become part of The Permanent Things that Kirk loved so dearly.

Of course his memoirs don't stop with *The Conservative Mind*. Kirk goes on to recount how the political climate of the nation slowly changed. "The Remnant he had addressed had grown in numbers," writes Kirk approvingly, "now and again it had taken a town or a castle." Though it would be presumptuous to credit Kirk for the victories, his influence should not be given short shrift. Russell Kirk made an enormous difference in the intellectual environment.

Kirk's memoirs are an honest and enlightening account of the intellectual battles of the past half-century. *The Sword of Imagination* is testimony to a life lived in defense of principle. It is a proper farewell from a giant of our times. □

*Mr. Watkins is assistant editor of The Freeman.*

## The Solzhenitsyn Files

Edited and with an introduction by  
Michael Scammell

edition q, inc. • 1995 • 470 pages • \$29.95

Reviewed by Robert Batemarco

“Freedom without a literature is like health without food. It just cannot be. To be sure, the yearning for freedom is deep in the hearts of men, even the slaves of the Soviets. But the yearning can turn into hard, numb despair if the faith upon which freedom thrives is not revived from time to time by reference to its philosophy. It is not without reason that the communists do away with writers on freedom. . . .”

So wrote Frank Chodorov, former editor of *The Freeman*, over 40 years ago. The story of Alexander Solzhenitsyn provides a case in point. Michael Scammell skillfully teases out that story from over 150 recently declassified documents from Soviet archives. The only thing that detracts from the drama of the events described therein is that many of us already know how it turned out. For those readers not familiar with the whole affair, Scammell's excellent introduction places everything in context. The book covers a 17-year period starting with the beginning of the end of Nikita Khrushchev's thaw in 1963 through Solzhenitsyn's being awarded the Nobel Prize in literature and his years of exile.

In between, we are treated to a fly-on-the-wall view of Soviet Politburo agonizing over how to stop Solzhenitsyn's searing criticism of the Soviet system without provoking adverse reaction from the West. The alternatives they consider range from “editing down” his works to the point of eliminating their appeal abroad to trying and imprisoning him. They eventually settle on exile and revocation of his Soviet citizenship.

It is enlightening to hear firsthand the Politburo's morbid fear of criticism, their straitened views of free expression (“the Soviet writer will go his own way. Together with the Party”), the extent of their surveil-

lance activities (knowing where he shops, what he spends, and recording his conversations with his children), their attempts to discredit him even after his expulsion, accusing him of employing some of their very own *modus operandi* (“lies, juggling of facts, intentional distortion of the truth, etc.”) and being out of touch with reality (KGB head and later party chairman Yuri Andropov claims, “there are indications that domestic and foreign policies of the Party enjoy the unanimous support of all the Soviet people,” for instance).

We also hear from Solzhenitsyn himself, in his courageous letter to the Fourth Congress of Soviet Writers as well as some of his seized manuscripts. We can see for ourselves the qualities of mind and character which made him such a threat in the eyes of the Soviets. Contrast the prescience of the following statement with the self-delusion of the Andropov quote cited above: “This is a government without prospects. They have no conveyor belts connecting them to ideology, or the masses, or the economy, or foreign policy, or to the world communist movement—nothing. The levers to all the conveyor belts have broken down and don't function. They can decide all they want sitting at their desks. Yet it's clear at once that it's not working. You see? Honestly, I have that impression. They're paralyzed.”

Although the documents included here of necessity reflect the Party's perspective, most readers will take them not at face value, but rather as a glimpse into the pathology of power. The lesson of the demise of that power is that nothing is more effective in curing its pathology than the truth. □

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