

importance. Ultimately, Manning was important because she stood for something. She found the world a dangerous place and human beings within it highly unreliable and imperfect, though still supremely worthy of concern and protection. She was at heart a “conservator” who labored in opposition to innovation and change. What she sought was a haven of goodness and beauty within a world that appeared to offer little of either. Like Austen, Dickens, and Conrad, those pillars of the Great Tradition to whom she is compared in David’s biography, Manning was opposed to extremism and innovation. Her focus was on the virtues of continuity and restraint, and it is this moral discernment that ensures the lasting value of her fiction.

REMEMBERING THE TRADITION

Allen Mendenhall

Forgotten Conservatives in American History
by Brion McClanahan and Clyde Wilson
(Gretna, LA: Pelican, 2012)

Amid the flurry of books lately published on “conservatism,” why would we need one consisting of biographical vignettes of landmark conservative Americans? Brion McClanahan and Clyde Wilson, coauthors

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of *Forgotten Conservatives in American History*, say it’s because the terms *liberal* and *conservative* have been divorced from their traditional meaning. If, as the authors claim, “words are themselves weapons in the eternal campaign of designing men to achieve power and exploit their fellows,” then it is imperative that a signifier like *conservative* corresponds with the reality to which it refers as nearly as possible. The question is, what is the reality of conservatism? Put differently, what does it mean to be conservative, or what does conservatism look like?

The purpose of this book is to provide telling profiles of American thinkers who have defined, and ought to continue to define, conservatism. These men show us what conservatism means and looks like. Ideas are associated with the people who think and promote them. It would seem to follow that profiles of several men whose ideas are similar would bring about needed clarification that, in turn, would allow us to affix an explanatory label to their ideas. The individuals profiled in this book by and large share certain values, principles, and practices. From their commonalities we can infer what conservatism means. McClanahan and Wilson seek to recover the term *conservatism* from concepts imposed upon it by neoconservatives. Their book is ammunition in the battle over a word, and more generally over the ideas that attach to a word.

There are, all told, sixteen portraits here, some of families and paired thinkers, others limited to individuals. The names range from James Jackson and John Taylor of Caroline to James Fenimore Cooper, Grover Cleveland, H. L. Mencken, William Faulkner, and Mel Bradford. Lest readers object to the absence of other names, this reviewer points out that the list is not meant to be exhaustive and that the authors are, after all, concerned about *forgotten* conservatives whose legacy requires

restoration. What links these thinkers, as McClanahan and Wilson make clear at the outset, is their agreement with conservatism as it was defined and described in Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*. (Although focused exclusively on American figures, *Forgotten Conservatives in American History* is like a miniature version of Kirk's more prodigious tome.) Kirk's traditionalism and exercise of the moral imagination guided McClanahan and Wilson in their selection of subjects.

This book is valuable not so much for the details it reveals about its subjects—the scope of each chapter is too short for great depth—but for what it reveals about the conservative tradition in America. One could argue that it is this tradition—not the individuals making up this tradition—that has been forgotten. Just what, exactly, is this tradition? The authors propose the following:

According to Kirk's once-honored teaching, a conservative is one who values "prescription," that is, who defers to established custom and wisdom more than to rational speculation, who insists that inevitable change should be cautious and reconcilable with the wisdom of the ages. A conservative avoids being a "provincial in time," recognizing a responsibility to the past and the future; he would not willingly burden future generations with debt by spending up everything for present notions and pleasures. An American conservative will certainly honor the true "Constitution of the United States" as it was before greed, ambition, ignorance, and deceit distorted it beyond all recognition. An American conservative naturally remembers the warnings of the most revered forefathers about "entangling alliances" with foreigners.

A conservative tends to value voluntary community, a larger sphere for

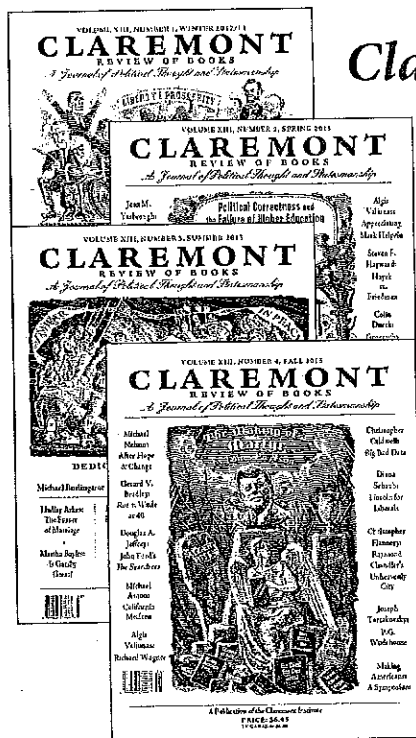
private society, and a smaller sphere for government, especially the federal government. Fundamentally, a conservative is one who accepts that the world was endowed by its Creator with an enduring moral order (as described by C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*). In his love of Creation a conservative delights in the proliferating variety of life among free people, the direct opposite of "multiculturalism," which is an enforced monolithic non-culture. A conservative knows as well that man is forever imperfect, that evil comes in many comely guises, and that not all "progress" is progress.

There you have it: conservatism in a nutshell. Of course, as the vignettes imply, and as this definition suggests, conservatism is even richer and more complex than one excellent description can provide for, and that is precisely why the authors take issue with the popular—and, I might add, vulgar—understanding of conservatives as ideologues who embrace "Machiavellian tactics against opponents and against the American people," who glory "in big government," and who fervently plan to "project American armed force around the world, the national debt be damned." Conservatives of the Kirkean stripe are, in some respects, to be blamed for such cartoonish associations because, out of neglect or passivity, they let those with meaner motives appropriate the signifier *conservative*.

McClanahan and Wilson, however, are not willing to part with that word just yet; the contest isn't over. Rather than finding another word for their tradition, as others have tried to do—I am thinking of such groups as "traditionalists," "paleoconservatives," "porchers," and "Burkeans"—McClanahan and Wilson hope to take back what is rightfully theirs. One gathers that they would—with good

reason—balk at Francis Fukuyama’s recent advice in *The American Interest* that “conservatives” ought to begin looking to Alexander Hamilton and Theodore Roosevelt for inspiration. How strange to suggest that conservatives ought simply to pick figureheads whose nonconservative ideas represent good short-term political strategies rather than to extend already established conservative beliefs and conventions. Fukuyama apparently thinks that conservatives can sustain conservatism by rejecting conservatism. In light of this silliness, I applaud the authors of *Forgotten Conservatives in American History* for their tenacity.

McClanahan concludes with an essay referring to his experience as a graduate student. More than anyone else, graduate students—particularly conservative ones—would profit from this book. McClanahan and Wilson have provided several portraits of understudied conservative minds, and conservative graduate students can now expand these portraits into more extensive studies or dissertations. If only we had another Russell Kirk to enlarge this corrective project into an American conservative genealogy similar to *The Conservative Mind*. That *Forgotten Conservatives in American History* was published at all suggests that such a possibility remains.



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