

Anglo-America's Ambiguous Triumph

Yesterday's winners may become tomorrow's losers

Books Reviewed by Mark Wegierski

Among the central points of *The Cousins' Wars* is that "[t]he great formative events in the rise of England and then of the United States ... were wars — bitter, fratricidal wars — accompanied by Puritan and abolitionist sermons and battle hymns and principally fought to change the shape of internal politics, liberty, and religion." It was through the three cousins' wars — the English Civil War of 1640-1649 (and its follow-up in 1688), the American Revolution of 1775-1783, and the U.S. Civil War of 1861-1865 — that the English-speaking world critically reshaped itself.

Broadly, the result was to uphold political liberties, commercial progress, technological inventiveness, linguistic ambition and territorial expansion ... from the seventeenth century, the English-speaking peoples on both continents defined themselves by wars that upheld, at least for a while, a guiding political culture of Low Church, Calvinistic Protestantism, commercially adept, militarily expansionist, and highly convinced, in Old World, New World, or both, that it represented a chosen people and a

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The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics, and the Triumph of Anglo-America

by Kevin Phillips
New York: Basic Books
707 pages, \$28.95



The Roots of American Order (third edition)

by Russell Kirk
Washington, DC: Regnery
Gateway
540 pages, \$14.95

Is Blood Thicker Than Water?

by James M. McPherson
Toronto: Vintage Canada
90 pages, \$14.95

manifest destiny. In the full three-century context, Cavaliers, aristocrats, and bishops pretty much lost and Puritans, Yankees, self-made entrepreneurs, Anglo-Saxon nationalists, and expansionists had the edge, especially in America... There is also an unmistakable thread of ethnocultural continuity: First, East Anglia led the Parliamentary side in the partly successful English Civil War. Later, New England, East Anglia's seventeenth century Puritan offshoot, was the most aggressive formulator of the American rebellion (and this time, instead of Puritanism being crushed by the Restoration of 1660, New England Yankeedom triumphed and expanded). Finally, in the 1860s, Greater New England — a cultural region now stretching west through New York, Ohio, Michigan, and Minnesota to Oregon and Puget Sound — won the battle to control the expansion and orientation of the United States into the mid-twentieth century." (pp.xiii-xv)

Phillips' entire book is an elaboration of this grand thesis — of the Puritan, Anglo-Saxon march of progress, culminating in "the triumph of Anglo-America" (ie, primarily the U.S. and Britain, and, secondarily, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). Phillips also pays attention to the various losers — the Celtic fringe of the British Isles, especially Ireland; Roman Catholicism (many native Irish lost their attachments to Catholicism in the unsettled and intolerant conditions of the New World); the American South; American blacks and

Indians; and even Germany (because America absorbed and assimilated tens of millions of Germans that might have well-served Germany's future).

Phillips supports his arguments with a mass of demographic, political, electoral and sociological data. Unfortunately, there are some obvious errors in the details (eg, about the numbers of Federal troops stationed in the South during Reconstruction, p.476). Phillips' grand narrative pretty well rolls over the reader in a crescendo of WASP celebration. However, it is more difficult to see an unalloyed world-historical triumph of Anglo-America in the 1960s and after — certainly not in the sense in which it was earlier conceived.

Russell Kirk's View

Russell Kirk's *The Roots of American Order* reaches further back than Phillips, to the ancient Hebrews, although Phillips also argued that the U.S. was heavily influenced by Protestant reading of the Old Testament, seeing itself as a "Chosen People" and a "New Israel." After introducing the necessity of order as "the first need of all," Kirk moves on to look at "The Law and the Prophets," and their link to the Massachusetts founding. Burke's view that the main American tradition constituted "the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion" (p.47) is cited. The author then traces roots through the ancient Greeks, the Romans, Christianity, and then "the light of the Middle Ages."

Successive chapters return to "The Reformers' Drum," the English Civil War period, and the Glorious Revolution. The "salutary neglect" of the Thirteen Colonies by Britain is seen as challenged by George III's and the British Parliament's policies. Further roots of American order are found in such Eighteenth Century intellectuals as Montesquieu (the exponent of the division of powers); Hume (a sceptic who supported tradition); Blackstone (the leading authority on British common law); and Burke (who was sympathetic to the American colonists, but also later opposed the French Revolution).

In his chapter on the "Declaration and Constitution" — where the main idea is that the American conflict was "a revolution not made, but prevented" (p.296) — this was also Burke's term for the Glorious Revolution of 1688 — Kirk tries to accentuate the aristocratic aspects of early American character quoting, for example, John Randolph of Roanoke: "I am an aristocrat: I love liberty, I hate equality" (p.318). (Today's U.S.

"paleoconservative" John Randolph Club is named after him.) Chapter XII on "Contending against American Disorder" includes panegyrics to Lincoln.

The last major thinker examined is Orestes Brownson, who, while he condemned socialism, cherished the value of community. Looking at the same historical events as Phillips, Russell Kirk is able to give a more conservative cast to what Phillips saw as the unalloyed WASP and liberal march of progress. Russell Kirk claims that "...[a]s an instrument of order, the Constitution of the United States would be more successful than any other formal written device in the history of mankind" (p.431). He also says that, even at the time of the writing of his book (the third edition appeared in 1991) "...the general character of American order remains little altered" (p.482).

Kirk's book is weighty, including a foreword, notes for each chapter, an epilogue by Frank Shakespeare, a list of suggested readings, a chronology, a note of acknowledgement, a note about the author and an extensive index.

Crises of Nationalism

James M. McPherson, acclaimed as one of the leading current historians of the American Civil War (he won the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction for *The Battle Cry of Freedom*) offers a fairly slender book, based on his Barbara Frum Lectureship address in 1998 (under the aegis of the History Department of the University of Toronto).

The main themes of the book are an extended comparison between the movement for Southern secession in the 1850s, and the Quebec separatist movement in today's Canada; and an examination of the Cavalier, anti-Puritan theme in the self-definition of Southern secessionists. The book is based heavily on a comparison of civic as opposed to ethnic nationalism, that is, the notion of a multi-ethnic citizenry united by political rights (the United States or Canada) versus a polity where membership is defined by ethnicity (for example, the Southern Confederacy or Quebec). This divide of civic or ethnic nationalism is taken from Michael Ignatieff's *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (reviewed in *The Social Contract*, vol.IV, no.3 (Spring 1994), pp.223-224).

In the current context, making a comparison between Quebec and the American South in the 1850s is highly insulting to Quebecois nationalists, who, it should be remembered, were for many decades second-class citizens in their own province, and are certainly not upholding slavery. There is a presumed condemnation of ethnic nationalism — such as that of Quebec or the white South — as an “artificial,” “constructed,” “arbitrary” identity. The recounting of the Norman-Cavalier versus Saxon-Puritan conceptions is intended to make the South look ridiculous. Yet, can the present-day models of multicultural regimes, with their panoply of increasingly exotic rights, and all kinds of doublethink, be seen as any more natural?

The line between civic and ethnic nationalism is probably not that easy to draw. Some would argue that the political tradition of civic nationalism which emerged in Britain, America, and Republican France, could only occur out of the matrix of more primordial ethnic factors, and that the numerical decrease of the various ‘charter-groups’ will almost invariably cause a recursion to more primal ethnic definitions.

Today, the excesses of Anglo-Saxon liberalism and morality appear to have overwhelmed most of the European and European-descended societies, *via* the American empire. It could be argued that the earlier success of the Anglo-Saxons has actually aided “the suicide of the West.” Without the earlier triumph of Anglo-Saxon liberalism and mores, the subsequent evolution of history would perhaps have been much different. (For example, France, Ireland, and a royalist, Catholic European tradition might have been more prominent.)

It could be argued that today only various designated minorities are truly valued within most states with European majorities, while the rights of European minorities outside those states are viewed as irrelevant (as recently seen, for example, in Zimbabwe). What may be highly ironic is that Latin America is among the last regions on earth which values its European-descended population. Virtually all of the Latin American societies have pronounced “caste” systems. It may also be pointed out that in Russia and some of the east-central European states, the respective European majorities are clearly treated with respect, although this is often accompanied by strong dislike for their neighbors, who are also European (the classic example being Croatia versus

Serbia).

The notion that there can be a viable democratic state without there being a majority group of long-standing history and duration (that sets the tone for the culture and practices of the society as a whole) appears highly questionable. The multi-ethnic state will tend to be either a traditional monarchy or empire (in earlier times), a caste-society, or the current-day bureaucratic regime, mostly favoring only designated “minorities” — who may often end up as the numerical majority. Indeed, if the current sociopolitical, demographic and immigration trends are extrapolated unchanged into the future, most European groups might well become powerless and despised minorities in their own countries.

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Even purely civic nationalism (which is said to be characterized by “equal rights for *all*”) may be under stress from multiculturalism (with its claims to group-rights) and a more radical decentralization, especially at a time of massive, vastly dissimilar immigration into European countries (a situation clearly very different from that prevailing previously). Those societies such as the United States, which appear to have triumphed in the world-historical struggle, and appear to be in the main line of the march of progress, may, ironically, be subject to ever-fiercer condemnation by multiculturalist, hypermodern forces, and be more prone to a near-total transformation of their identities. This tendency is exemplified by the re-conceptualization of the United States and its earlier notions of “exceptionalism” in terms of “the first universal nation” — which is said to be characterized by loyalty to a liberal idea — rather than to ethnicity. It may be somewhat harder to describe Slavs, Celts and Latins as inveterate oppressors, or to

reconfigure their political cultures in hyper-universalist directions. So the new foci for defending European civilization may indeed be shifting to the Slavic, Celtic, and Latin “fringes” or peripheries — as opposed to Anglo-America, which could be seen today as a curious mixture of technological and economic prowess combined with social and cultural decline.

American patriots may perhaps hope for a recovery of some earlier fragments of the national identity. The U.S. continues to be a country where Christian religious belief holds a great deal of sway — and Catholics today

are welcomed into the broader Christian alliance. The longstanding Anglo-Saxon tradition of responsible individualism and sound democracy (with its emphasis on self-government and “the free yeomanry”) may also have some resonance. There are also elements of the progressive and social scientific traditions in America that could be seen as supportive of American nationalism.

Considering these various factors, neither a total condemnation nor total celebration of Anglo-America is apposite. •