

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

*The Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures*

550

The Mystic  
Chords of Memory:  
Reclaiming  
American History

*By Wilfred M. McClay*



The Heritage Foundation was established in 1973 as a non-partisan, tax-exempt policy research institute dedicated to the principles of free competitive enterprise, limited government, individual liberty, and a strong national defense. The Foundation's research and study programs are designed to make the voices of responsible conservatism heard in Washington, D.C., throughout the United States, and in the capitals of the world.

Heritage publishes its research in a variety of formats for the benefit of policy makers; the communications media; the academic, business, and financial communities; and the public at large. Over the past five years alone The Heritage Foundation has published some 1,500 books, monographs, and studies, ranging in size from the 927-page government blueprint, *Mandate for Leadership III: Policy Strategies for the 1990s*, to the more frequent "Critical Issues" monographs and the topical "Backgrounders," "Issue Bulletins," and "Talking Points" papers. Heritage's other regular publications include the *Business/Education Insider*, and *Policy Review*, a quarterly journal of analysis and opinion.

In addition to the printed word, Heritage regularly brings together national and international opinion leaders and policy makers to discuss issues and ideas in a continuing series of seminars, lectures, debates, briefings, and conferences.

Heritage is classified as a Section 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, and is recognized as a publicly supported organization described in Section 509(a)(1) and 170(b)(1)(A)(vi) of the Code. Individuals, corporations, companies, associations, and foundations are eligible to support the work of The Heritage Foundation through tax-deductible gifts.

*Note: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.*

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999  
U.S.A.  
202/546-4400

# The Mystic Chords of Memory: Reclaiming American History

Wilfred M. McClay

I am delighted to be with you this afternoon and to have a role in the Heritage Foundation's worthy project of commemorating Russell Kirk's many contributions to American intellectual life. My own task today is to explore the subject of historical consciousness in America—a subject about which, strange to say, Russell Kirk actually did not write a great deal, at least not addressing the subject directly. But he didn't need to. His entire life and work were nothing less than an extended elaboration of that very theme. Historical consciousness seemed to have been infused into the air he breathed and mixed into the soil of the ancestral land in which he chose to live. No place or thing, however ordinary, was too humble for him to grant it the dignity of a story.

One notices this historical tendency even in Kirk's language. It has a most peculiar lilt, which often charms and sometimes startles the reader with its unexpectedly fanciful and antique echoes. (As an example of the latter, I remember being shocked when I read Kirk describe a leading social critic as an exemplar of "defecated intellect"—shocked, that is, until I looked the word up, and saw that Kirk used the word in an older and more etymologically informed sense than my own, strictly scatological understanding.) What struck many readers as mannered or affected diction in Kirk was actually something quite different. It was evidence of his strong conviction that words, like people, are living things, bearing living pasts deserving of recognition and respect. That was typical of him. He had the ability to make even the dullest things gleam with the luster of historical imagination. With all due respect to Governor John Engler, who inaugurated this series of lectures, who would have thought that Michigan could ever be made a name to conjure with? Yet Kirk made his many readers curious to see his beloved "stump country" and to explore the tiny burg of Mecosta. Although his Gothic and Romantic tastes drew him to old European cathedrals, Roman ruins, and other such haunted sites, he was not prone to sigh, in the perennial complaint of American writers such as Hawthorne and Henry James, that America was too new or raw or commerce-minded to be the stuff of art. On the contrary, Kirk knew how to see monuments, and ruins, everywhere he looked.

What others called "junk" Kirk thought of as "cultural debris," which is a short way of saying that Kirk took a long view of the disorders of our contemporary American world, seeing them in light of the thousand follies and disorders that have come before us in the human procession. Historical consciousness gave him a broad, capacious vision, which always insisted that the civilization we enjoy has deep living roots. Those roots of American order extend back in time not only to 18th-century Philadelphia, but further back, to London, Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem. Virtually everything he wrote testified to his intense awareness of the immanence, inescapability, and indispensability of the past, and not only the past of the previous generation or two, but the distant past—the past of the Law and the

---

Wilfred M. McClay is Associate Professor of History at Tulane University.

He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on December 13, 1995, delivering the fourth lecture in the 1995 series of Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures.

ISSN 0272-1155 © 1996 by The Heritage Foundation.

Prophets, of Solon, Cicero, Augustine, the English constitution, Montesquieu, Burke, Lincoln.

Kirk's career, then, went against the American grain, and it did so in two different ways. In the first place, he was an intellectual genuinely at ease in America. He may have fancied himself a Bohemian Tory, but he was never that most tiresome of bores, "the alienated American intellectual," a restless species that grazes in herds of independent minds. He knew he was fortunate to live in a country free and prosperous enough to permit him a career as an independent writer, and he never forgot that fact. But at the same time, he was never an uncritical celebrant of American culture. He loved his country, but he did not idolize it. Instead, he held it accountable to a transcendent standard, against which he often found it seriously wanting.

In particular, Kirk lamented the deification of progress, the cult of absolute equality, the advance of the Leviathan state, the licentiousness of the autonomous self, the transvaluation of values, and other such modern abstractions that have transformed and eroded the American republic. While he vehemently opposed ideology in all its forms, including conservative ideology, he at the same time lamented Americans' fixation upon short-term, practical, problem-solving, results-oriented, and utility-maximizing thinking in place of a deeper reflection upon the proper ends of things. Kirk, then, was trying to do something characteristic of traditionalist conservatives: fight on two fronts at once. He was defending the American way of life against its cultured despisers—while at the same time challenging many elements of that way of life by holding it up to its classical and Judeo-Christian antecedents. He comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable—and sometimes they were the same people.

Kirk was not the only one to act this way. Many American conservatives feel caught in a similar bind. Most of them are dyed-in-the-wool patriots, and yet they wonder whether the very America they so ardently defend is only too willing to sell its birthright for a mess of pottage—or, for the more ideologically inclined, a pot of message. Even here at Heritage, which is a very busy, worldly place, teeming with clever people and clever ideas addressing themselves to the immediate concrete policy questions and debates of the day, one is likely to encounter that very American question: Of what use is historical consciousness?

The dangers inherent in this characteristically American attitude are wonderfully illuminated by a joke I heard the other day, which with your indulgence I will retell—not only because it bears directly upon the point, but because storytelling seems a very Kirkean way to get at a Kirkean truth.

The tale begins with a tourist, wandering through the back alleys of San Francisco's Chinatown, where he comes upon a little antique shop, filled with curious pieces of statuary and other art objects. What especially catches his eye is a beautifully wrought, life-size bronze statue of a rat. He asks the elderly shopkeeper for the rat's price.

"The rat costs twelve dollars," says the shopkeeper, "and it will be a thousand dollars more for the story behind it."

"Well, you can keep the story, old man," responds the tourist, "but I'll take the rat."

After buying the rat, the tourist leaves the store, carrying his newly acquired statue under his arm. As he crosses the street in front of the store, he sees two live rats emerge from a sewer drain and fall into step behind him. He looks nervously over his shoulder and starts to walk faster. Soon more rats appear and begin to follow him. In a few minutes rats are coming out of every sewer, basement, vacant lot, and landfill, forming themselves into swarms



and packs and massing in step behind him. People on the street point and shout at him as the pursuing rats force him into a trot, and then a dead run. But no matter how fast he runs, the rats, now squeaking and squealing grotesquely, stay right behind him. By the time he reaches the water's edge, the line of rats trailing him extends back for twelve city blocks. Finally, in desperation, the tourist leaps as high as he can up onto a lamppost and hugs it by one arm while, with the other, he flings the bronze rat far out into the waters of San Francisco Bay. To his amazement, the hordes of rats race right by him and follow the statue, surging over the breakwater and leaping into the Bay—and then promptly drowning.

Whereupon the tourist hurries back up to the antique shop. When he appears at the door, the shopkeeper smiles knowingly and says, "Ah, yes, sir. So now you've seen what the statue can do, and you've come back to find out the story?"

"No, no, no," replies the tourist excitedly. "Now I want to buy a bronze statue of a lawyer!"

There's nothing more rich with cultural meaning than humor. Clearly the main point of this joke is its hardwired animus toward lawyers. But there's another point, too. The tourist in this story is a man interested only in immediate results, and things, and in what those things can be deployed to do. He couldn't care less about "knowing the story." And the punch line assumes that we pretty much agree with him. If the statue eradicates lawyers, who cares how it works? A picture may be worth a thousand words, but no story is worth a thousand bucks. Such is the characteristic American attitude toward the past—You can keep your story, old man; I'll take the rat. But the tourist makes a completely unwarranted universalistic assumption—that all bronze statues from this shop will have the same effect. How can he know that, until he has heard "the story?" His lack of interest in "the story" is not only philistine; it is foolish. Hasn't he learned that you get what you pay for? Yet this is the sort of mechanistic attitude, which has rightly been called "crackpot realism," that Kirk always had to battle—as do all of us who care about the American past and about the state of our historical consciousness. For you can't really appreciate the statuary of American political and institutional life, or know the value of American liberty and prosperity, unless you pay the price of learning the story.

Of course, we also now have another, very different, problem: that the older "story" of the American past is increasingly regarded, especially by our academic historians, as nothing but a story of rats, which is another way of saying that the struggle to reclaim historical consciousness in contemporary America has to occur on two different fronts, too. It is one thing to believe the past is unworthy of our attention. It's another thing to assert that it is unworthy of our respect. We now confront both of these attitudes at once, and it is hard to say which is the more threatening. It is alarming to have our suspicion confirmed, most recently by a Department of Education survey of 22,000 American schoolchildren, that our young people are learning next to nothing about American history. But it is equally alarming to contemplate what passes for historical study in the academy, the arena in which our leaders are educated. There the reign of identity politics and political correctness has, if anything, only fortified its hold in recent years. It sometimes seems that, to paraphrase the old blues song, if it wasn't for bad history, we wouldn't have no history at all. Indeed, it is a melancholy thing to reflect, as I sometimes do, that the only consolation to be had for the execrable courses our students endure is the fact that they won't remember them after they graduate. Unfortunately, though, they may not remember any of the good stuff either.

It's time, then, to recover some fairly basic truths. Historical consciousness is to civilized society what memory is to individual identity. One cannot say who or what one is—one can't say one is anyone, or anything, at all—without some selective retention of experience

and source of continuity. One cannot learn, use language, pass on knowledge, raise offspring, or even dwell in society without the aid of memory. Without memory there are no workable rules of conduct, no standard of justice, no basis for restraining passions, no sense of the connection between an action and its consequences. There can be no sense of the future, as a moment in time we know will come, because we remember that other tomorrows have come, too. And there can be no recognition of the sacred, no act of consecration or devotion to the unseen—for nothing exists but the proximate and the sensate. A culture without memory will necessarily be barbarous, no matter how technologically advanced and sophisticated, because the daily drumbeat of artificial sensations and amplified events will drown out all other sounds, including the strains of an older music.

In our day, even the academic study of history has begun to yield to such barbarism. For an increasing number of younger historians, the whole point of studying the past is to “prove” that all our inherited institutions, beliefs, conventions, and normative values are arbitrary—mere “social constructions” in the service of ignoble power—and are therefore utterly without legitimacy or authority. In this view, it is absurd to imagine that the study of the past could have any purpose beyond serving the immediate needs of the present—and anyone who thinks otherwise is either disingenuous or stupid. The very idea of being enlarged or drawn out of ourselves by encountering the strangeness of the past—and the strange familiarity of the past—now seems quite beside the point.

Kirk’s view of the matter was different, first of all because, for him, the past was a land of enchantment, pervaded with flitting shadows and ghostly presences. But it was also the source of what little real solidity there is to be found in the world. The study of the past, he believed, should cause us to recognize the ways that the past has authority over us. For historical consciousness, as he understood it, is not merely an awareness of the past and of one’s own connection to it. It is the cultivation of respect for what cannot be seen, for the invisible sources of meaning and authority in our lives—for the formative agents and foundational principles that, although no longer tangible, have made possible what is worthy in our own day. To borrow from the language of religious faith, the tutelage of historical consciousness teaches us what it means to walk by faith, and not only by sight.

We see, then, that historical knowledge and historical consciousness are two very different things; and the acquisition of historical consciousness, properly understood, will have to be something different from the academic study of history—though the latter does not preclude the former. The acquisition of historical consciousness means learning the discipline of memory, which is far more than a matter of personal memory—though that is, of course, where it begins and ends. Historical consciousness means learning to appropriate into our own moral imagination, and learning to be guided by, the distilled memories of others, the stories of things we never experienced firsthand. It means learning to make these things our own, learning to look out at the world we experience through their filter, learning to feel the living presence of the past inhering in the seeming inertness of the world as it is given to us. Of course, discernment between and among memories is of great importance. Not all are worth preserving, and not all are reliable. Here is where the practice of professional historians has been especially valuable, in preserving so much that would otherwise be lost and in ferreting out the evidence for certain propositions while uncovering the faulty basis for others. But the advocate of historical consciousness is likely to give preference to those memories whose importance and reliability have been established not merely by a select committee of the American Historical Association, but also by the passage of time. To repeat, historical knowledge and historical consciousness are different things, and the latter can never become the province of a historical priesthood.

An outside observer cannot easily tell when an individual's vision of reality itself has been transformed. No one else can see with another person's eyes, feel with another person's heart. But let us imagine a visitor to the battlefield at Gettysburg who knows the history of that battle and war, knows the text of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and knows something of subsequent American history—not only knows these things, but has digested and internalized this knowledge. That visitor will experience something very different on his visit from what an uninformed eight-year-old child will see. What the educated observer sees when he gazes at the modest grassy bump of Cemetery Ridge will be, in a sense, more real than what the unimpressed young child sees, even though they are looking at the same thing. Such an example undercuts the positivistic notion that we live in a world of inert facts to which we impute values. Insofar as we are historical, remembering creatures, we inevitably participate in the meanings that we apprehend—a mysterious form of participant knowledge that is, as John Lukacs argues, something very different from mere subjectivity.

Part of what makes our visitor different, too, is the fact that he comes to Gettysburg as a part of what sociologists call a "community of memory." His reactions are not determined merely by his idiosyncratic impressions, though he may well have had some, or by his extensive knowledge, however detailed it may be. Instead, he is one of many people who remember what happened in that place, and in some way he is connected to all of them, to all who are bound together by remembrance of that story. In the end, communities and nation-states are constituted and sustained by such shared memories—by stories of foundation, conflict, and perseverance. The leap of imagination and faith, from the thinness and unreliability of our individual memory to the richness of collective memory, that is the leap of civilized life; and the discipline of collective memory is the task not only of the historian, but of every one of us. Historical consciousness draws us out of a narrow preoccupation with the present and with our "selves," and ushers us into another, larger world—a public world that "cultures" us, in all the senses of that word.

Historical consciousness is, then, part of the cement that holds America together and makes us willing to strive and sacrifice on her behalf. One might think of the Gettysburg Address as an exemplary text in this respect, since it sought to give meaning to the suffering of the present precisely by reference to the visionary sacrifices of the Founders. Instead of deconstructing the past in the name of the present, it reinterpreted the present by reference to the past.

An even better example, however, is Lincoln's first inaugural address, from which the haunting phrase in my title, "The Mystic Chords of Memory," is taken. To understand what sort of appeal Lincoln was making with these words, we need to recall the setting in which the address was given in March of 1861. In the wake of Lincoln's election to the presidency in 1860 without the support of a single Southern state, seven states from the Deep South had already left the Union, and the crucial border states were on the verge of doing so as well. The Union that Lincoln so greatly cherished seemed to be dissolving before his eyes. With this inaugural speech, Lincoln began his attempt to counter this disintegration. He made it clear that, so far as he was concerned, the union of states under the Constitution could not be broken, for it was meant to be a perpetual union, rather than being revocable at the whim of a single state or combination of states. The speech takes a variety of turns, offering legal, political, moral, and prudential reasons for its case. Its tone is by turns both conciliatory and stern. But with its final clinching paragraph—added (it is said) at the suggestion of William Henry Seward—the speech soars to immortal heights:

