

## Russell Kirk (1918-94)

The article opposite is one of the last to have been completed by Dr. Russell Kirk, who died on April 29 at his ancestral home in Mecosta, Michigan. Kirk was a member of the Editorial Board of HUMANITAS and a co-founder of its sponsoring institute. He first came to public attention when he published *The Conservative Mind* (1953; now in its eleventh edition), which was prominently and favorably reviewed in *Time* magazine. The book was based on Kirk's dissertation at St. Andrews University in Scotland for the Doctor of Letters, a degree very sparingly awarded and never previously earned by an American. The book challenged the conventional view of the United States as the product of Enlightenment liberalism. The American political and cultural tradition is imbued with a larger Western classical and Christian heritage. Kirk drew attention to such thinkers as John Adams, John Randolph, John C. Calhoun, Orestes Brownson, Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More as representing a rich vein of thought connecting America with an older Western tradition.

In some 30 books—including *The Roots of American Order*, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, and *Eliot and His Age*—and in countless articles and lectures dealing with intellectual history, education, literature, and politics, Kirk taught Americans a broader, more historical understanding of their society. Conservatives, he argued, did not have to go across the Atlantic to find authentic roots. To those on the right who advocated radical and economic individualism, he pointed out that genuine conservatism recognizes freedom's dependence on community, tradition, and faith. He argued for the primacy of ethics and culture. A recurring theme in Kirk's writings is the need for the moral imagination, nourished by great works of literature. Here Kirk was highly influenced by Babbitt, who also inspired and shaped his interest in Edmund Burke. Throughout his life Kirk warned of abstract ideology, whether of the right or the left. Sound thinking and politics are historically rooted and adjusted to the needs of time and place.

Russell Kirk had a distinctive, engaging literary style, and he was accessible not just to academic specialists. He was a man of ideas rather than a technical philosopher. Going against the intellectual tide and almost never finding favor with the large publishing houses, he still acquired an extensive following in the United States and abroad. Among his admirers were leading scholars but also prominent politicians, including at least two U.S. Presidents. Few writers of his generation had an influence comparable to his.

Although lacking independent means, Kirk lived virtually his whole life as a free man of letters supporting his family through his writing and lecturing. Except for brief periods, he accepted no academic appointments. In his writings he extolled such virtues as civility, hospitality, magnanimity, piety, and love of family. Friends and acquaintances, including many intellectual opponents, warmly attested that Russell Kirk lived as he preached.