

# A Case for Conservatism

THE CONSERVATIVE MIND, by Russell Kirk; Faber and Faber, English price 30/-.

(Reviewed by F. L. W. Wood)

THIS book states a case which should be seriously pondered, though Mr. Kirk's simple-minded vehemence makes him a poor advocate. He is convinced that since the French Revolution mankind has suffered unmitigated disaster. Abandoning religion, tradition and the stability of an agricultural society we have huddled into industrial towns and frustrated man's true nature in a ruthless, futile quest for equality. Individuality has been crushed and spiritual values despised. We indulge in reckless experiment, and give no chance to the leisurely processes of growth and maturity. The quest for "liberty" has culminated in the tyranny of an omniscient state whose planning leaves no detail untouched, and relentlessly crushes variety and enterprise.

All this happened, says Mr. Kirk, essentially because England and America believed Bentham rather than Burke, and the bulk of his book expounds the views of Burke and of the prophets who

followed him. The expositions are learned and useful, though clogged with eulogy, and do honour to thinkers and politicians who had the courage to be unpopular. These men fought a losing battle but, thinks Mr. Kirk, their time will come. Victorious democracy has infallibly betrayed the ideals on which it was originally based and out of its self-destruction respect for old values may revive. The material for rebuilding is there if we would only use it: a storehouse of Burkean ideas and a few great institutions headed, one understands, by the American Constitution: "the transcendent political accomplishment of modern times." Spurred by disaster we may yet cease our social tinkering, realise that bad laws and institutions should be endured till it pleases Providence to alter them, and come to accept in sober earnest an astonishing pronouncement well quoted from Michael Oakeshott: "The world is the best of all possible worlds and everything in it is a necessary evil."

Much of Mr. Kirk's argument can be shot to ribbons. His conception of the Old Regime is naive in the extreme and makes the Revolution quite incomprehensible. It is just not good enough to



BURKE



BENTHAM

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"Victorious democracy has infallibly betrayed the ideals on which it was originally based"

blame the Terror, or the horrors of municipal housing or state education, without a thought for the conditions against which these things were a reaction. His forces of evil are emotively black, and his forces of good are sometimes unrecognisable. He seems clearly not to have drawn the pith from Tocqueville's

famous remark (which he quotes) that the French aristocracy knew how to die but not how to govern. After all, it was ability to govern, not willingness to die, that society asked of the European aristocracy, which expired from political ineptitude rather than from an overdose of Benthamite credulity. The

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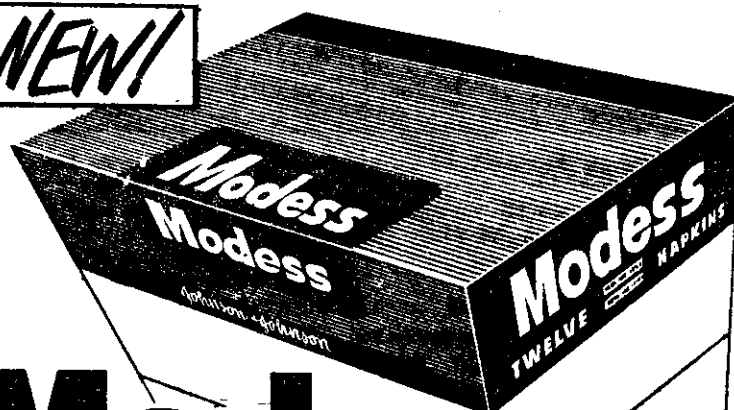


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