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Learning Upon the Shoulders of Giants

Russell D. James

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BOOK REVIEW:

Learning Upon the Shoulders of Giants

Review of Kirk, Russell. *The Sword of Imagination: A Half-Century of Literary Conflict*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.

Russell D. James

The Sword of Imagination is an autobiography of the highest caliber, written by Russell A. Kirk, a prolific educational writer and probably the last true American man of letters. Kirk paints for the reader a picturesque portrait of himself through the use of the third person narrative.

Reading this volume for the second time in as many years, I remembered a quote from one of Kirk's other works, *The Roots of American Order*: "Mankind can endure anything but boredom." Kirk relates in *The Sword of Imagination* anything but boredom. He shows the reader through poignant imagery the life of a son and grandson, student, soldier, professor, man of letters, and husband and father. No part of Kirk's life, I believe, was boring.

Kirk knew that gaining knowledge through formal education is commendable, but incomplete. Such an education can lead to boredom and confusion. Kirk reminds us that "the best-remembered learning, and often the most salutary, lies beyond the classroom." The astute reader learns from reading this book that boredom only comes from educational idleness and the neglect of imagination.

One such account related by Kirk in *The Sword of Imagination* is the story of his travels to "Castle Borstal." Kirk, when a doctoral student at St. Andrew's University in Scotland, visited an old castle that had been turned into a reformatory for delinquent boys of the Scottish slums. This Borstal, like many others in Britain named after the first such delinquent academy near Kent, had sprung up after World War II. It was thought by those social reformers of the post-war years that if the state provided for everything, then a person would be contented and not need to become a criminal.

But, alas, the winds of truth blow reality in the faces of social reformers, as evidenced by the Borstal reformatories. Such developments in social welfare do not work, as the education of the masses was shown to result in boredom from experimental change. The reformers at Castle Borstal had not eliminated boredom, they had only changed its place of residence, from slums to reformatories.

For Russell Kirk true education was the strengthening of mind and soul, forever intertwined but often the innocent victim of an attempted unraveling by social reformers. To educate the mind and soul of a person, one must stand on the shoulders of the giants of the past, peering into history to live prudently in the present. Kirk used *The Sword of the Imagination* to not only tell of his life as a man of learning, but to educate others on the true means of education: finding excitement around every corner traversed in anticipation and in every book read with diligence, extinguishing boredom altogether.

**Russell D. James is graduate student in counseling,
Adams State College, Alamosa, CO.**