

Patrick Allitt. *The Conservatives: Ideas & Personalities Throughout American History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 325pp.

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Patrick Allitt's *The Conservatives* is an ambitious and concise book that earned back-cover blurbs from all the "right" people, including George Nash, an icon of conservative intellectualism, who remarks that "Patrick Allitt has written a perceptive, rigorously balanced, and richly panoramic account of conservative ideas and thinkers in American politics and culture since 1787."

On the face of it, a title like *The Conservatives* raises more questions than it answers. "The conservatives" implies that there is a definite, nameable group of people who share a common vocabulary and worldview. But "conservative" is a fluid signifier as demonstrated by the sheer number and variety of people promoting conservatism while championing disparate and even incompatible beliefs. Trying to situate this term historically only multiplies its complexity.

Even if conservative thinking has splintered into factions and assumed various identities – or perhaps *because* it has done so – it remains durable and complicated and warrants more attention than naysayers have accorded it. Without arguing for or against the individuals and trends that he profiles, Allitt examines the sources of conservatism while explaining its divisions. He makes the case that conservatism is "an *attitude* to social and political change that looks for support to the ideas, beliefs, and habits of the past and puts more faith in the lessons of history than in the abstractions of political philosophy" (2). He also points out that "before the 1950s there was no such thing as a conservative *movement* in the United States," although "certain people throughout American history can be understood as conservatives, but with the important caution that this was not a noun most of them used about themselves" (2).

By acknowledging that "[c]ertain ideas and themes recur throughout the book," (3) Allitt implies that these are indispensable to our understanding of

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American conservatism. Among these are a suspicion of democracy and equality, a view that civilisation is fragile and easily disrupted, and a fear of social dissolution.

Fussy historians might complain about the breadth of Allitt's timeline. Tracing conservatism from the Founding generation to the Reagan Revolution and Cold War would seem to imply that conservatism did not differ definitively from era to era or region to region. Yet Allitt is careful to track the subtle and not-so-subtle changes within conservatism as it found new and various expressions over time. A major premise of his book, in fact, is that conservatism is reactive, organic, and unfixed.

The dearth of scholarship charting American conservatism from the Revolution to the present – although overstated by Allitt – has to do with a number of factors, not least of which is the overwhelming corpus and scope of material available from that period. The danger in undertaking such a range is in creating mere patchworks of profiles or stories with only fleeting references to more celebrated figures, whose ideational influence may not equal that of lesser known figures. Yet the span of Allitt's work is its strength as much as its weakness, especially in light of his subject, conservatism, a way of thinking that, as the cliché goes, draws intelligibility from the accumulated wisdom of the ages and that filters out putative minutiae from its extensive archives. Allitt's book is not exhaustive, but just enough to work – and to work well.

À la Russell Kirk, Allitt treats conservatism as having a decipherable patrimony and a constant trajectory. And why not? What is conservatism if not an organized philosophy rooted in mores and custom and mindful of cultural consistency and continuity? By treating conservatism as having a recognisable lineage with an established pedigree, Allitt implicitly affirms the claims of conservatives who purport that conservatism is an inheritance of tradition and thought. In a way, Allitt's book is a conservative treatment of conservatism, a reminder that scholarship can be short and objective without sacrificing rigor or complexity.

Readers will come away from this book better equipped to contextualise current claims to the American conservative tradition. Enlightening reading for self-described “liberals” and self-described “conservatives” alike, *The Conservatives* will force readers to challenge prevailing assumptions and might even convince some of the compatibility of their thought with its supposed opposite. Put differently, this book can enable those who call themselves conservatives to find value in ideas that

have at times signified liberalism, and those who call themselves liberal to find value in ideas that have at times signified conservatism. For that reason alone, the book deserves an audience.