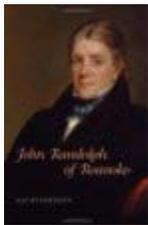


[Fall 2012](#)

Glory and Indignity



John Randolph of Roanoke

by David Johnson.

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012

Cloth, 352 pages, \$45.

Allen Mendenhall

“I am an aristocrat. I love liberty, I hate equality.” Thus spoke John Randolph of Roanoke (1773–1833), one of the most curious, animated figures ever to grace American soil. That David Johnson’s biography of Randolph is the first of its kind since Russell Kirk published [John Randolph of Roanoke](#) in 1951 suggests how deteriorated American memory and education have become. Randolph ought to be studied by all American schoolchildren, if not for his politics then for the vital role he played in shaping the nation’s polity. Dr. Kirk declared that in writing about Randolph, he was summoning him from the shades. If so, Johnson has gone a step farther and brought Randolph into the sunshine to reveal just how spectacular a man he really was.

Kirk’s [biography of Randolph](#) was in fact his first book. Kirk dubbed the colorful Virginian a “genius,” “the prophet of Southern nationalism,” and the “architect of Southern conservatism.” In [The Conservative Mind](#), Kirk treats Randolph as a necessary link between George Mason and John C. Calhoun and proclaims that Randolph should be remembered for “the quality of his imagination.” Randolph enabled the proliferation and preservation of the conservative tradition in America. He became an icon for decentralization and localism.

Why would a scandalous, sickly, go-it-alone, riotous rabble-rouser appeal to the mild-mannered Dr. Kirk? The answer, in short, is that Randolph was as conservative a politician as America has ever produced, and he was, despite himself, a gentleman and a scholar. Eccentric though he appeared and often acted, Randolph celebrated and defended tradition, championed small government and agrarianism, sacrificed careerism and opportunism for unwavering standards,

professed self-reliance and individualism, took pains to preserve the rights of the states against the federal government, delighted in aristocratic tastes and manners, read voraciously the great works of Western civilization, cultivated the image of a statesman even as he attended to the wants and needs of his yeomen constituents, discoursed on weighty topics with wit and vigor, and adhered to firm principles rather than to partisan pandering. Admired by many, friend to few, he made a prominent display of his wild personality and unconditional love for liberty, and he devoted himself, sometimes at great cost, to the ideals of the American Revolution, which had, he claimed, marked him since childhood.

Remembered chiefly (and, in the minds of some progressives, unfortunately) for his contributions to states' rights doctrines and to the judicial hermeneutics of strict constructionism, Randolph was responsible for so much more. The son of a wealthy planter who died too young, Randolph became the stepson of St. George Tucker, a prominent lawyer who taught at the College of William and Mary and served as a judge on the Virginia General District Court and, eventually, on the Virginia Court of Appeals, the United States District Court for the District of Virginia, and the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. A cousin to Thomas Jefferson, Randolph studied under George Wythe and his cousin Edmond Randolph. A boy who was forced to flee his home from the army of Benedict Arnold, Randolph later played hooky from college to watch the orations of Fisher Ames, the stout Federalist from New York, and Madison. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives as well as the U.S. Senate, and was, for a brief time, Minister to Russia. A supporter of Jefferson before he became Jefferson's tireless adversary, he criticized such individuals as Patrick Henry, Washington, Madison, Monroe, John Adams, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster. He was sickened by the Yazoo Land Scandal, opposed the War of 1812 in addition to the Missouri Compromise, and promoted nullification.

Many conservatives, Kirk among them, have tended to overlook the more unpalatable aspects of Randolph's life, whether personal or political. For instance, Randolph was, more than Jefferson, enthralled by the French Revolution and supportive of its cause. He manufactured a French accent, used a French calendar, and called his friends "Citizens." In his twenties, he referred to himself as a deist "and by consequence an atheist," and he acquired, in his own words, "a prejudice in favor of Mahomedanism," going so far as to proclaim that he "rejoiced in all its [Islam's] triumphs over the cross." One might excuse these infelicities as symptoms of youthful indiscretion and impetuosity, but they do give one pause.

Not for lack of trying, Randolph could not grow a beard, and although he spoke well, his voice was, by most accounts, awkward, piping, off-putting, and high-pitched. His critics have painted him as a villain of the likes of Shakespeare's Richard III: resentful, obstinate, loudmouthed, and as deformed in the mind as he was in the body. Yet Randolph cannot be made into a monster. More than others of his station in that time and place, Randolph was sensitive to the problems of slavery, which had only intensified rather than diminished since the Founding. He freed his slaves in his will, granted them landholdings in Ohio, and provided for their heirs. Slavery was incompatible with liberty, and Randolph, despite being a product of his time, appears to have worried much about the paradox of a nation conceived in liberty but protective of institutional bondage. Randolph asserted, in some way or another, over and over again, that his politics were

based on a presumption of liberty, which was (and is) the opposite of slavery and governmental tyranny.

Ten years in the making, Johnson's biography was well worth the wait and cannot be accused of historical amnesia or selective telling. It presents Randolph in all of his glory and all of his indignity. Johnson's Randolph is as much a man of letters, taste, and refinement as he is a grudge-holding, finger-wagging scoundrel. As biographies go, this is surely one of the best in a long time. That holds for any biography of any individual—a tall claim to be sure, but one this volume meets. Johnson's prose is impeccably paced and free of jargon. His two Appendices—one displaying Randolph's family tree and the other profiling prominent individuals of Randolph's time—make for useful references. This book will benefit students and teachers alike, and all readers will find here an accessible, exciting account of early American politics.

Would that we had a conservative movement today that resurrected gentility and culture as indispensable values of leadership. Ever cognizant of the interests of the landed gentry, bookish and proudly eloquent, steeped in Latin and Greek, fearful of taxation, Randolph would, no doubt, be frowned upon today, and the neglect of his memory is perhaps the backhanded tribute paid to him by the left-leaning educational establishment. Our politicians no longer relish Shakespeare, as Randolph did, and it is doubtful that they have read seriously from Virgil or Horace, Milton or Chaucer. Add to these the works of Cervantes, Plutarch, Pope, Defoe, Swift, Fielding, Ovid, Livy, Xenophon, Cicero, Hume, Beattie, and Blackstone, and one begins—but only just begins—to get a sense of the wide breadth of Randolph's knowledge. Having wandered from William & Mary to Princeton to Columbia, Randolph discovered that he despised the academy in no small part because he was more intelligent than anyone there. Later, as one of the most preeminent if not the most storied Antifederalist spokesmen, he established himself as a man of consistency and principle. One knew where he stood, and when he pontificated about the dangers of government and its various manifestations throughout history, he did so as one who was fully, impressively informed.

Johnson makes the case for Randolph's continued relevance by citing such recent misfortunes as the government bailouts, undeclared wars, judicial supremacy, and out-of-control spending. These events, the direct consequences of rapid centralization of power, bloated bureaucracy, and vulgar political gamesmanship, would have horrified Randolph, who called for small government, tax elimination, debt reduction, and repeal of those laws tending to inflate government. Randolph griped that he “would not die in Washington” where he would “be eulogized by men I despise, and buried in the Congressional Burying Ground.” He more or less got what he wanted; although magnificent in life, he left this world unceremoniously, his burial unremarkable. In a way, this seems appropriate. From his legacy, we are reminded that there is much greatness in what is small, and much smallness in what is great. At a mere 233 pages—excluding notes, acknowledgments, and appendices—the same could be said of this book.

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