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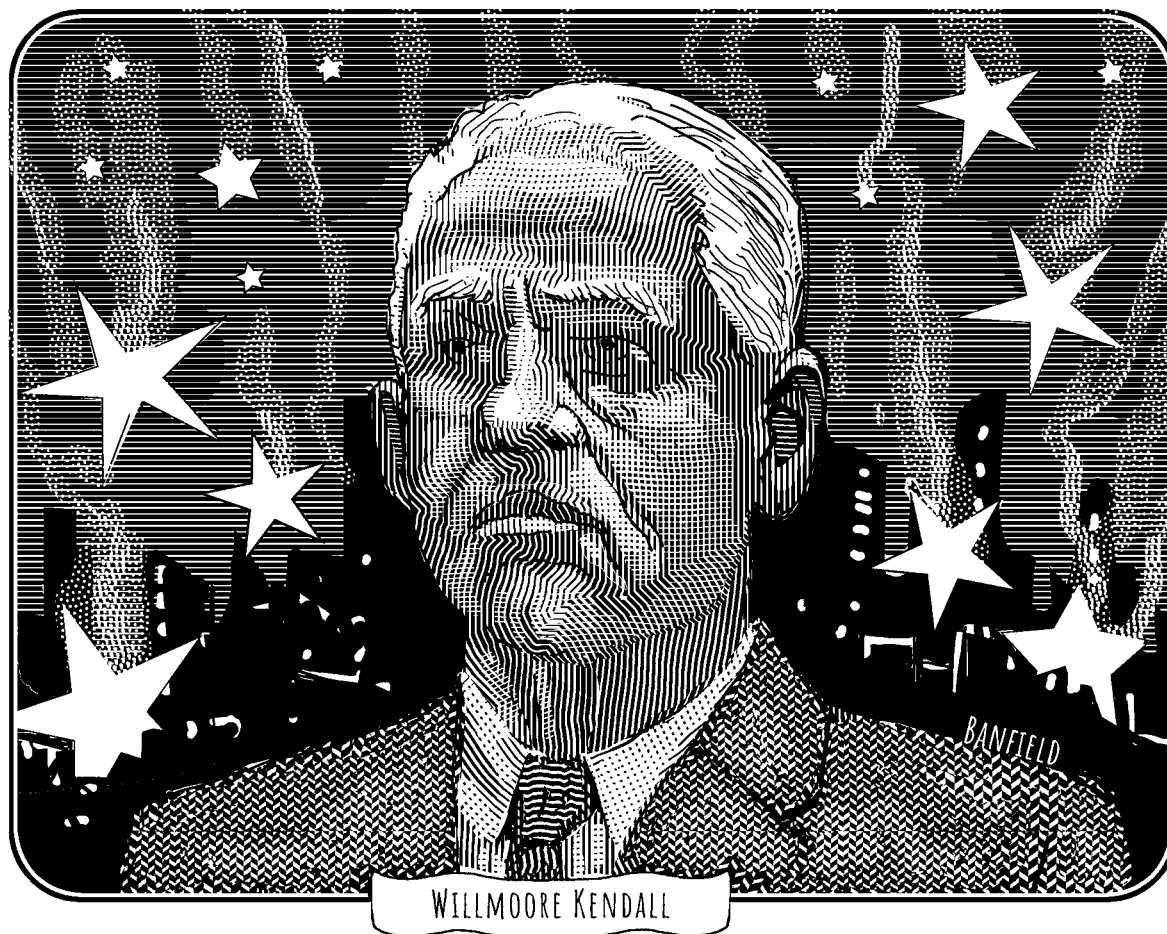
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Book Review by Stephen Wu

HE COULD SPELLBIND AND SLAY

Heaven Can Indeed Fall: The Life of Willmoore Kendall, by Christopher H. Owen.
Rowman & Littlefield, 256 pages, \$105



ABE RAVELSTEIN WAS THE MOST FAMOUS philosopher to come forth from novelist Saul Bellow's pen—but he wasn't the first. Decades before using the University of Chicago's Allan Bloom as the model for the Plato-quoting title character in *Ravelstein* (2000), Bellow dreamed up a hard-drinking ex-OSS operative and firebrand political theorist named William Mosby for the 1968 short story "Mosby's Memoirs." Mosby "thought much, accomplished much," and "made some of the most interesting mistakes a man could make in the twentieth century." He surveyed the field of political philosophy and found it wanting:

As one who had personally tried to create a more rigorous environment for slovenly intellectuals, to force them to do their homework, to harden the categories of political thought, he was aware that on the Right as on the Left the results were barren.... Princeton Univer-

sity had offered Mosby a lump sum to retire seven years early. One hundred and forty thousand dollars. Because his mode of discourse was so upsetting to the academic community, Mosby was invited to no television programs. He was like the Guerrilla Mosby of the Civil War. When he galloped in, all were slaughtered.

WILLMOORE KENDALL—THE INSPIRATION for Mosby—could spellbind and slay. The son of a blind Methodist preacher from Oklahoma, Kendall became a slashing Cold Warrior armed with heartland sensibilities. He was a founding editor for *National Review*, started by his undergraduate student William F. Buckley; authored important studies on John Locke and the American political tradition from perches at Yale, Stanford, and the University of Dallas; oversaw anti-Communist propaganda in Latin America; and generally incensed friends

and foes alike. Yet for all his many contributions, both polemical and academic, Kendall has largely been forgotten.

Partly this is due to an early death from a heart attack in 1967, at age 58. Perhaps too his personal prickliness made it hard to win over hearts, even if minds acquiesced. Kendall left behind no "school" of disciples despite constructing a distinct political theory. In its simplest form it was a right-wing populism, but one constrained by shared political commitments. Kendall's populism was rooted in his distrust of elites—be they the media, the judiciary, or the "expert" class—and in placing the locus of legitimacy in majority rule. And his conservatism found expression in a powerful defense of the historic political and cultural consensus embodied in America's founding documents and his clarion calls against the dangerous consequences of untrammelled philosophical liberalism.

If those concerns sound prescient, it is because contemporary society may have borne



out Kendall's worries and his warnings. So Christopher Owen's *Heaven Can Indeed Fall: The Life of Willmoore Kendall* feels timely. An emeritus professor of history at Northeastern State University, Owen traces Kendall's development from a self-described "good socialist" into a seminal figure of postwar conservatism. His is the first book-length treatment of Kendall; it is not a comprehensive intellectual biography but rather a well-sourced chronological overview of his life and works.

OWEN INTRODUCES READERS TO A precocious wunderkind born in 1909 to a staunchly Midwest Democratic family. Under the tutelage of his father, the Reverend Willmoore Kendall, Sr., young Willmoore started high school at age 9 and arrived at Northwestern University by 13, only to flunk out within a semester. He got his first taste of journalism working as a junior reporter at the *Tulsa Tribune* for two years, and then finished college at the University of Oklahoma. Adept at Spanish—his father having mastered Greek, Hebrew, French, and German—Willmoore returned to Evanston to take a graduate degree in Romance languages. In 1930 he enrolled at the University of Illinois for a Ph.D. in the same, but two years in won a Rhodes scholarship to study philosophy, politics, and economics at Pembroke College, Oxford. There his college tutor was R.G. Collingwood, the celebrated philosopher and historian whose influence, Kendall later remarked, would "weigh very heavily" upon him throughout his life. Though he did not adopt wholesale Collingwood's "reenactment" theory of historical imagination, Kendall did take to heart the exhortation to seek out an author's own understanding of his work rather than filter it through imposed critical lenses. This approach suited Kendall and was shared and refined by the New Critics at Louisiana State University, where he would later take up a teaching post.

At Oxford Kendall indulged in youthful socialist fervor as he imbibed from Karl Marx and John Maynard Keynes, writing to his father of "enslaving conventions" and complaining of the strictures on the working class. Kendall's collectivism would abate, but his concern for the everyman remained a constant of his political theory. Take for instance one of his earliest academic writings, "The Majority Principle and the Scientific Elite" (*The Southern Review*, 1938), published while teaching at LSU and still completing Ph.D. studies. There Kendall outlined the fundamental inescapability of the majority principle: either we live in a regime whose decisions are made by 50% plus one, or we do not. The

young Kendall equated pro-majoritarianism with the "true Left," i.e., the champions of "the people," and anti-majoritarianism with the "true Right," i.e., the group seeking to concentrate decision-making among elites. Kendall then applied those categories to the American system, influenced by fashionable arguments that the founders had set up a conservative cabal to thwart the popular will with separated powers, judicial review, and limitations on government. Kendall would later reverse that view as he developed a more nuanced political theory, but even as a graduate student he had already identified his abiding themes: that the majority principle is inescapable, that ethics must precede politics, and that any *real* majority debate cannot be confined to a limited class of scientists, bureaucrats, jurists, or tastemakers.

AFTER TAKING HIS OXFORD DEGREE, marrying (for the first time of three), and briefly working as a journalist at the United Press in Madrid, Kendall returned to Illinois to complete his doctorate, switching from Romance languages to political science. His dissertation offered a revisionist account of John Locke by recasting him not as the quintessential advocate of individual natural rights, but rather a proponent of majority rule. Through a close reading of the *Second Treatise* he argued that Locke, despite his purported defense of natural rights, did not actually hold them sacrosanct above all else. Kendall maintained that the social contract, even on Locke's own terms, vested rights in civil society only as approved and conferred by the majority. This led to what Kendall described as a tension in Locke's political theory: How could natural rights be immutable and intrinsic, but also never guaranteed except by majority grace? Early Kendall reconciled the two by reading into Locke a "latent premise" that allowed majoritarianism and rights theory to coexist: a rational majority would never withdraw natural rights from the minority or from the sphere of politics.

Kendall's position borrowed heavily from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The "rational majority" resembled Rousseau's "general will," which itself would channel the civic virtue inherent in small, homogeneous communities toward the common good. A constrained politics was both natural and necessary to Rousseau, since liberty would founder if devolved away from direct democracy into representative institutions (as any large or heterogeneous polity required). That analytic framework is evident throughout Kendall's early works; his model for good governance was the plebiscitary democracy of Athens' like-minded countrymen.

Thus in "The People Versus Socrates Revisited" (*Modern Age*, 1958), Kendall praised the Athenian jury for its majoritarian decision to eliminate a man whose alleged denial of the city's gods threatened to corrupt her youth and destabilize her society. When it came to the People versus Socrates, Kendall was with the people.

THIS PRAGMATIC COMMITMENT TO PRESERVING a society's way of life recurs in Kendall's thought. It helps to explain his vociferous anti-Communism and early defense of Senator Joe McCarthy in the 1950s. By then he had spent time working in government, overseeing propaganda in Latin America during World War II in Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. Drawing on his journalism background, Kendall would write twice-daily radio scripts in Spanish and Portuguese to counter the Axis information campaign. In these he began to solidify for himself a robust nationalism. After the war, as his personal conservative reformation continued, he would go on to work for the Central Intelligence Group, a precursor to the CIA.

On the strength of his government recommendations and his academic writings he landed a spot in Yale's Political Science department. So when Bill Buckley and Brent Bozell showed up as undergraduates spoiling to fight the university's left-wing consensus, they found a ready ally in the professor. He would continue to advise the pair in their writings, and offer his own as a regular contributor to *National Review*. That mentorship, combined with continued support for McCarthy, would fully and finally ostracize Kendall from the Yale faculty and eventually lead to their buying out his tenure. But Kendall believed that the overwhelming majority of citizens (faculty clubs notwithstanding) condemned clear anti-American sympathizers. He could therefore marry his majoritarian sympathies with his patriotic ones.

It was hardly reflexive jingoism at the root of Kendall's behavior. Communism was the latest and then-most serious threat to the fundamental character of the polity itself, but Kendall would have objected on philosophical grounds to any and all such assaults on the basic American way of life. He had no time for unlimited liberal toleration that countenanced outright anti-Americanism in the public square. He excoriated John Stuart Mill as the poster boy of a destructive and internally inconsistent liberalism that declared all questions open except for the question of toleration itself. It was inconsistent because it was illiberal about its first principles, and



dangerous because it conceived of society as nothing more than a “debating club,” abstracted away from actual communities, tradition, and lived experience. Kendall’s critical insight was that a society predicated on such bottomless inquiry—an “all-questions-are-open-questions” society—must eventually fall into such profound differences of opinion that the “common premises” of deliberative decision-making and shared living disappear completely. At that point, the extremes of opinion will polarize and ossify, suspicion will fester, and toleration between rival camps—the very goal of the original project—will become impossible. In other words, total open-mindedness yields total collapse.

KENDALL’S POLITICAL THEORY THEREFORE required some shared connective tissue that would allow for communal decision-making—what he would later call a “constitutional morality.” The phrase fused together underlying commitments to traditional morality and classical virtue alongside newfound appreciation for the structural features of the U.S. Constitution. Gone was his youthful disdain for the founders as self-interested hoarders of power. In its place was a nuanced reading of *The Federalist* wherein enumerated and separated powers, combined with judicious safeguards such as the local selection of congressmen, cooperated together to channel majority will and suppress majority faction. Kendall maintained his longstanding position that majority rule was the legitimate mode of governance, but he now understood the Madisonian project as an ingenious design to filter majority sentiment while evading the danger of mob rule. Congress would bring virtuous statesmen to office to reflect local constituencies and concerns while nevertheless acting for the whole. The president was to counterbalance by embodying a national majority consensus. But the lodestar, in Kendall’s view, was always deliberative democracy concerned with the common good, which he took as the

hallmark of the American tradition all the way back to the Mayflower Compact. Kendall therefore inaugurated an understanding of the founding that shifted emphasis away from inalienable rights and toward a consensus-based politics that he claimed had been built into the fabric of American constitutionalism since 1620.

At this final turn in his intellectual development, Kendall accordingly discarded the conventional wisdom that the founding constituted a philosophical revolution powered by Locke. Drawing from the teachings of Leo Strauss, Kendall came to realize that the “latent premise” he had earlier ascribed to the *Second Treatise*—a benevolent majority allowing absolute majority rule to coexist with natural rights—was really his own invention. The mature Kendall recognized that Locke’s seeming contradiction was deliberately designed to conceal his true, esoteric teaching, which prized the ultimate right of self-preservation without any corresponding duties. In Lockean philosophy, this right cannot even be renounced or made forfeit via the social contract. At bottom, that absolutist emphasis on rights destroyed the prospect for deliberative decision-making and reduced Locke’s politics, in the last analysis, to consent. In Kendall’s view, the necessary and unacceptable consequence of that framework was individualism unbound.

THUS KENDALL’S MOST DEVELOPED WORK occupies a space between two camps of modern American conservatism. The first, mapping onto what might be provisionally called “national conservatism,” argues that America, built fundamentally on a Lockean foundation, was therefore doomed from the beginning to degenerate into atomized self-interest. On the other hand, classical liberals and some subset of Claremont scholars (including the late Harry V. Jaffa) agreed that Locke did serve in some form or another as the country’s philosophical progenitor, but countered that Lockean political equality

and individual freedom allowed America to prosper and indeed flourish. Kendall took the third way: he denied Locke parentage over the American Founding but reasoned that America was better for it. Put another way, he agreed with the national conservatives on the perniciousness of Locke but with the Jaffa-ites on the goodness of America.

So where, ultimately, might we situate Kendall? Owen gives us the portrait of a conservative and a populist who scrambled the standard Left-Right divides. He embraced the everyman and not the power brokers. He was a perennial champion of majority rule. But his ideal majority was drawn from a community that, if not homogeneous, at least shared and embraced a common cultural and historical vocabulary. It had to be one committed first to a notion of civic “Americanism” that would then permit broader political debate and discussion within those bounded parameters. Anything less would lead to a fractured society unable to sustain republican governance and—eventually—even basic political discourse. Existential threats from within and without always required vigilance in defense of an America that Kendall regarded as fundamentally good and fundamentally worth conserving. As he warned his students of the utopian schemers, “These are people who are going to do justice, let heaven fall where it may. And I say to them, heaven indeed can fall and that it can hurt some of the heads it hits mighty bad.”

The question facing American conservatives today is whether the constitutional morality Kendall laid out as a precondition of the republic’s survival is still possible. But as the Right contemplates re-assimilating bluer collars into its electorate, as it pushes back against unlimited pluralism, and as it tries to recover an authentic notion of its tradition, the man who left no school may yet find new students.

Stephen Wu is a writer living in Los Angeles, California.

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