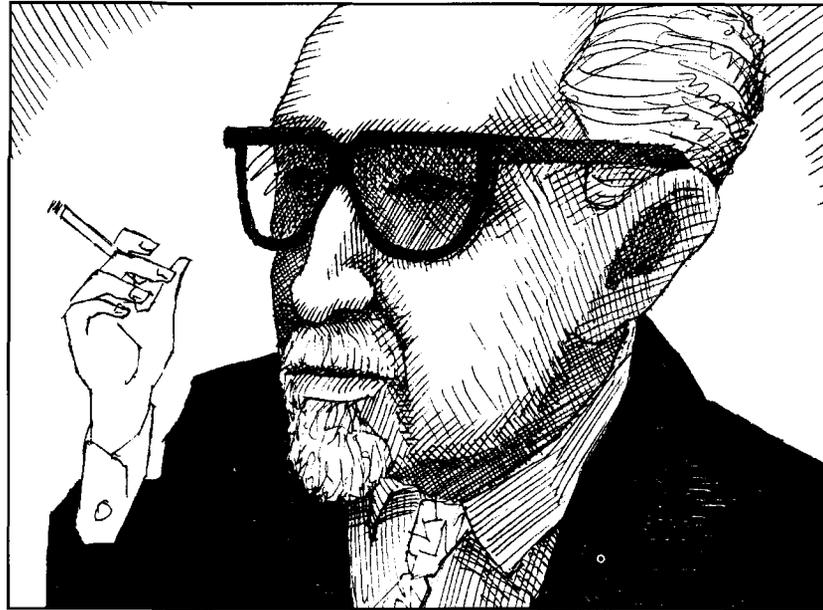


Dwight Macdonald

by John Lukacs



A *Rebel in Defense of Tradition* is the title of Michael Wreszin’s 1994 biography of Dwight Macdonald (1906–1982). It is a very good title, by which I mean something more than a “handle”; it is a precise phrase, a summary properly affixed to the memory of an extraordinary man. The emphasis of Wreszin’s biography is on Macdonald’s politics; but that is not what I wish now to emphasize. My wish is to draw attention to the unjustly forgotten and, yes, often unjustly obscured qualities of this American thinker.

We met in 1953, seven years after I had come to America. *Commonweal* had published a short essay of mine, dealing with literary correspondence. Macdonald wrote a note to the editors of *Commonweal* about something else and went on to say how much he liked my piece “above all.” I was elated, because I had read some of his writings by then and I was impressed with their literary and moral—yes, moral—qualities. I called on him in New York. He was living in Greenwich Village, toward the end of his marriage with his attractive first wife, Nancy. Our meeting was not a success. He sat there nervously, moving his large frame jerkily from one side to another, wagging his head, including that impressive forehead and head of hair and the *Henri-quatre* goatee of his. This combination of the Highlands and Greenwich Village, of a Scottish philosopher and Trotsky

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was there, too, in his diction: his carefully chosen words were pronounced in his high heady voice with occasional queer, lower-New York vowels and consonants. That may have been—I am not sure—an early habit that eventually had become his accustomed self: as in the case of George Orwell (with whom he had many things in common), his clothes, too, were part and parcel of Dwight Macdonald’s wish to identify himself with the people—well, with a certain kind of people. I knew that he called himself—and in many ways he indeed was—a freedom-loving anarchist; I tried to impress him with the argument that a true conservative and a true anarchist have much in common, because of their distrust of state power and their dedication to liberty. He was in one of his dour moods; our conversation did not go very far. Yet thereafter we became friends, close friends for a quarter of a century at least.

He visited us two or three times each year, staying for a week-end or for a few days. He loved and esteemed my first wife Helen and my second wife Stephanie. He came down on a dark winter afternoon, a month after Helen had died. As he walked in the door he stopped in the hall: “This house is empty,” he said. He loved children; he would talk to my children and tease them for hours.

Our relationship had its ups and downs. The downs were grim, but they did not last. Occasionally our relationship suffered because of his extraordinary thin-skinnedness. Once their car broke down somewhere in Pennsylvania; he rang us up in the middle of the night; I said that I would come and get him

and Gloria and drive them to a motel. He then hung up. I thought no more about it, until a few days later I got a four-page closely typed letter telling me that our friendship was over and done with, because I had failed to offer them hospitality that night. (Because of the distance it had not occurred to me.) On another occasion he hectored and lectured me savagely because I had complimented a young woman on the attractiveness of her wig: for reasons unfathomable to me he considered that an insult. He believed, as I do, that good manners are not superficialities, that manners have a moral foundation; yet he chose to be offensive and rude on occasion. Still, unlike the celebrated Lady Hester Stanhope about whom Kinglake wrote in *Eothen* that “with all the force and vehemence of her invective, she displayed a sober, patient, and minute attention to the details of vituperation, which contributed to its success a thousand times more than mere violence,” Dwight’s rudeness was defensive, the unexpected outburst of some kind of suppressed rage. During the last tragic years of his life that rage burst forth more and more often. We now know that his physical illness had then affected his mind. This was especially tragic as he was obviously suffering in more than one way; but also because he was a man of great kindness, with a mental and moral range far wider—and deeper—than that of most intellectuals. You had to know—and listen to—him to understand that. It was there, latent in some of his writings; but then he wrote no books, and he was no public speaker.

A tragic side of his character was his diffidence. Few people saw this. People thought that he was abrasive and arrogant because he was exaggeratedly self-confident. The opposite was true. His self-distrust was deeply hidden, at great and profound variance with his strong, confident, sure-footed opinions—which, however, were as genuine as his self-distrust (another example of the shortcoming of modern psychological theories of “super-ego” and “sublimation”).

However, self-distrust and diffidence are not the same as modesty and humility: the latter may serve all kinds of constructive purposes, while the former are often mental obstacles to achievement. To begin with the most obvious example: Dwight never wrote a book. This was not only the result of insufficient self-discipline. It was the result of insufficient self-confidence. He did not think that his writing ability could sustain the effort. He was a brilliant sprinter; a fine middle-distance runner; not a long-distance runner. During that last 15 or 20 years of his life his indiscipline and his diffidence began to feed upon one another. He was—in fits and starts—beginning to work on a book, and on a very important one: his memoirs. I had something to do with that. I urged and implored him during nearly 20 years to do so, because of my belief of the very great importance of such a book. Dwight Macdonald was in the center, or at any rate near the center, of American intellectual life for 50 years. He knew the protagonists; the passing scene; but even more important were his unique and honest powers of observation and insight, and his ability to describe much of this in his inimitable prose. He had already demonstrated his capacity to do that kind of writing in his short-run pieces put together in *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. I have many letters from him about this, as I nagged him to get going. Publishers offered him advances; he did begin the book; but he came nowhere near to more than the draft of a chapter, or perhaps not even that. This was a tragedy, as much for him as for the history of American civilization.

Yet there *are* more than a half-dozen books that he wrote,

collections of his essays and articles. Unlike most books of that kind, they are genuine books, uniformly readable and good from end to end, because they are extraordinarily coherent. They are living illustrations of the coherence of his principles and also of his mental vision: scattered small monuments to his greatness as a writer. He knew that the choice of every word was not only an aesthetic but a moral choice: in this sense alone he was an American moralist. Most of his contemporaries did not recognize this particular quality: a few, such different people as Mary McCarthy and Malcolm Muggeridge, did. The fault for the insufficiency of his recognition was due to the pettiness and narrowness and ideological obscurantism of his contemporary intellectuals; but then Dwight contributed to this himself. His occasionally erratic behavior, his unfashionable idiosyncrasies, his skepticism of anything and anybody declared “serious” or “seminal” gave ample evidence to those people who were inclined to think that he was not sufficiently serious, and not sufficiently intellectual.

Opposites attract. He came from an old upper-middle-class Scottish-Protestant American family. He rejected their standards and ideals early, in the 20’s, before he himself was 20 (though not them: he dedicated one of his books to his father. He once told me that his father laughed only at good stories, while his mother laughed at none). Knowing and feeling the powers of his mind—and, presumably, of his senses—he was attracted to the New York bohemian and intellectual atmosphere. In many ways he was a genuine intellectual: he enjoyed the ceaseless ideological argumentations and political squabbles among the intelligentsia, especially during the 1930’s; they were aware of his mental powers; yet he was plagued, too, by the complications of his character. Like those of every patrician who wants to be a bohemian, and of every aristocrat who wants to be a populist, his personality was complicated. He was flattered and admired and feared on occasion, but once the New York intellectuals found (in the 1960’s) that the generating of their own publicity could be very profitable, they no longer took him seriously enough. They thought that he was not One Of Them; he was not quite An Intellectual. (This was true of those on the left as well as of those of the new “right,” especially of the neoconservatives, disliked as he was by Irving Howe and hated by Sidney Hook.)

The opposite was true. He was more than An Intellectual; surely more than a New York Intellectual, for at least two reasons. One of these was his strong moral and aesthetic sense. He could detect—and, moreover, identify—the slightest trace of intellectual or stylistic fraudulence from no matter what ideological direction, with the kind of sureness with which a champion tea-taster or wine-taster would pinpoint the most minuscule presence of adulteration, resting on the sustained experience of a lifetime. In addition to the sureness of his moral insight, the very extent of his literary knowledge was phenomenal. He was so much better educated than most of the intellectuals and artists in whose bohemian circles he lived—during the last 20 years of his life, more and more out on the edge of their circles. Few of the latter knew (and know) much about literature before, say, 1880. Their knowledge reaches back to Tolstoy, to Dostoyevsky, perhaps to Matthew Arnold or to George Eliot. Dwight knew English literature from Chaucer and Shakespeare, backward and forward. One of his best sentences is the one with which he ended his review of *The New English Bible*, in 1962: “Like finding a parking lot where a

great church once stood.” There was this dour, Scots, monumental probity of his mind. But there was that other constant inclination: a revolt against the businessman mentality, seeking a home in the warm fog and smoke of intellectual argle-bargle. He knew—and with every reason—how much he knew, and how reliable his tastes were. He also thought—with very little reason—that he did not have any original ideas (he once told me that). Apart from the condition that there is really no such thing as an Original Idea, he was wholly wrong. He was so good in *describing* things and people and ideas that he ought not have bothered with the task of trying to *define* them. Yet something compelled him at times to move in that direction, even though he agreed with me that to describe is infinitely more important and fruitful than to define, and also that it was there that his unique talents worked best.

He was one of the few American thinkers and writers who escaped the fatal American predicament of reaching the zenith of achievement early, and not developing further afterwards. His writing, and mind, were better in his 40’s than in his 30’s, he reached his peak in his 50’s, and had it not been for the negative condition of his enormous wastefulness he would have gone on and on. He frittered away his great talent on articles and correspondence, often directed to insubstantial and even silly matters. This duality was there in his working habits. On the one hand he was utterly undisciplined, letting things go for hours, days, weeks, and eventually giving them up. On the other hand he took infinite care (and pains) to polish and change and get his prose exactly right; he would stay up all night in his cubbyhole office at the *New Yorker*. In his personal life, too, this duality persisted: he could be dreadfully disorderly, but at the same time extremely and precisely meticulous and demanding about certain manners and human considerations. He was an American gentleman who wanted to be a bohemian;

a man of letters who wanted to be an intellectual. These aspirations unraveled him in the long run.

His life falls into clearly distinguishable segments. He was sent to Yale in 1924 where he rebelled against the pedantic consideration of literature taught by William Lyon Phelps; Dwight was an avid reader, a rebel, and a modernist. In the early 1930’s he married his first wife, Nancy, who was beautiful, intelligent, and well-to-do. He worked for *Fortune* for a number of years. He was a Trotskyist for a while, having recognized the brutal dishonesties of Stalinist communism years before other intellectuals did. In 1944 he began to write and edit (with Nancy) his own magazine, *Politics*, a journal which was special, individualist, anarchist, flailing the dishonesties of intellectuals mewing for blood during and after the war and the rhetoric of General Patton as well as that of Max Lerner. He was on his way to becoming an American Orwell (Orwell liked his writing), but he was also pulled by the inclination to write like Lytton Strachey . . . well, at least a little. Anyhow, he did not have Orwell’s self-discipline. He was associated with *Partisan Review* for about 20 years, but he really did not fit in.

Politics ceased in 1947. Then—fortunately—William Shawn of the *New Yorker* offered him a berth. For the next 15 years or so they paid him (he ended up with a large debt to them) and wrote what I think is some of his best stuff. This stuff did not deal with politics but with culture and literature. His literary pieces were so good that I, at least, thought that he was much better than Edmund Wilson: indeed, had he kept on that path he could have emerged as the greatest American literary critic of all time. But he dribbled his talents away. He divorced Nancy and married his second wife, Gloria, in 1954. Around 1963 began the last chapter of his intellectual life. He moved away from the *New Yorker* and fell back on two of his inclinations which were not fruitful ones. One was the movies—all of his life he took them seriously as an art form (I think that movies, at their best, are good entertainment) and wrote column after column in *Esquire* as its movie critic, with occasional flashes of fire and wit but not very valuable, I fear, in their bulk. The other inclination was his return to radical politics, his participation in rallies, etc., during the Vietnam War. I thought that this immersion into the—falsely “revolutionary”—politics of that opposition was a waste of his time.

During the last ten years of his life he wrote less and less. Yet when he wrote something it was still as good as ever: his last published article (I think), the piece he wrote about Buster Keaton in the *New York Review of Books* in 1980, was Macdonald at his best. But he was ill and dosing himself with the strangest of medicines, and his mind was turning bitter and, as I now know, was badly affected with sclerosis. He had a genuine liking and taste for what was best in this life, the high pleasures of body and mind. He was discriminating, an anti-puritan puritan. But he never knew how to take care of himself, physically or intellectually.

His funeral service took place in a Unitarian church on Lexington Avenue on a gray, cold December day in 1982. The pews were peopled by older people of his generation, people who must have remembered the days when intellectuals in America were a small minority, when the company they kept had marks of a camaraderie, when intellectuals and gentlemen were not yet woefully opposite sensitivities, since both of these were avocations that did not pay. The current power-brokers of American intellectual life and the younger generation of New York Intellectuals were—inconspicuously—absent.

LIBERAL ARTS

A TERRIBLE BURDEN

“The L.D.S. doctrine of plural marriage became a personal matter for Charles and Annie in 1876, when Charles took a second wife, twenty four-year-old Mary Emma Fowler. . . . This must have been a great trial to both Charles and Annie. Theirs had been a wonderful marriage, and through journal entries and letters it is clear that the two adored each other. To have their tranquil lives interrupted by a plural marriage was difficult to accept.”

—from Bradley W. Richards, M.D., *The Savage View: Charles Savage, Pioneer Mormon Photographer (Nevada City, California: Carl Mautz Publishing)*

The Way of Love

Dorothy Day and the American Right

by Bill Kauffman



The title “Dorothy Day and the American Right” promises a merciful brevity, along the lines of “Commandments We Have Kept” by the Kennedy Brothers. After all, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement and editor of its newspaper lived among the poor, refused to participate in air-raid drills, and preferred Cesar Chavez to Bebe Rebozo.

But there is more to the “right” than a dollar bill stretching from the DuPonts to Ronald Reagan, just as the “left” is something greater than the bureau-building and bomb-dropping of Roosevelts and Kennedys. Maybe, just maybe, Dorothy Day had a home, if partially furnished and seldom occupied, on the American right.

The Catholic reactionary John Lukacs, after attending the lavish 25th anniversary bash for *National Review* in December 1980, held in the Plaza Hotel, hellward of the Catholic Worker House on Mott Street, wrote:

During the introduction of the celebrities a shower of applause greeted Henry Kissinger. I was sufficiently irritated to ejaculate a fairly loud Boo! . . . A day or so before that evening Dorothy Day had died. She was the founder and saintly heroine of the Catholic Worker movement. During that glamorous evening I thought: who was a truer conservative, Dorothy Day or Henry Kissinger? Surely it was Dorothy Day, whose respect for what was old and valid, whose dedication to the plain de-

encies and duties of human life rested on the traditions of two millennia of Christianity, and who was a radical only in the truthful sense of attempting to get to the roots of the human predicament. Despite its pro-Catholic tendency, and despite its commendable custom of commemorating the passing of worthy people even when some of these did not belong to the conservatives, *National Review* paid neither respect nor attention to the passing of Dorothy Day, while around the same time it published a respectful R.I.P. column in honor of Oswald Mosley, the onetime leader of the British Fascist Party.

National Review, dreadnought of postwar American conservatism, occasionally aimed its scattershot at Day. Founder William F. Buckley, Jr., referred casually to “the grotesqueries that go into making up the Catholic Worker movement”; of Miss Day, he chided “the slovenly, reckless, intellectually chaotic, anti-Catholic doctrines of this good-hearted woman—who, did she have her way in shaping national policy, would test the promise of Christ Himself, that the gates of Hell shall not prevail against us.”

The grotesqueries he does not bother to itemize; nor does Buckley—whose only memorable witticism was *Mater, Si, Magistra, No*—explain just what was “anti-Catholic” about a woman who told a friend, “The hierarchy permits a priest to say Mass in our chapel. They have given us the most precious thing of all—the Blessed Sacrament. If the Chancery ordered me to stop publishing *The Catholic Worker* tomorrow, I would.”

If Buckley and Kissinger were the sum of the American right, mine would be a very brief article indeed. But there is another

Bill Kauffman is the author, most recently, of *With Good Intentions?* (Praeger). This article is derived from a speech given at the Dorothy Day Centenary Conference at Marquette University in October 1997.