



A Noble Warrior with Pen in Hand

The Conversational Enlightenment: the Reconception of Rhetoric in 18th Century Thought, David Randall, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 297 pp., \$29.95 paperback.

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Bonaparte's idea of public education was that it should [keep]... social order.... it must, he said, "embrace the nation."

Georges Lefebvre, *Napoleon: From 18 Brumaire to Tilsit* (154)

Writers of our history as well as more pulpish storytellers who entertain with popular genres such as

heroic fantasy must work, as Napoleon says, "to embrace," to touch us as concretely as they can. We need the solid realities of our humanness, so our writers need to avoid being remote, abstract, "virtual." Clearly, I think, we need a solid and conservative cast to writing. I do hesitate somewhat with this opening on a versatile young writer, whom I want to promote, since one of my favorite old writers took as a ruling dictum for his work, "First, get general principles." Samuel Johnson had received this dictum when he was a young man from older, distinguished friends. But the great Johnson, also, wove substantial detail and concreteness into his *Lives of the Poets* (1820), each solidly unique in his portraits; provided immense hard-won detail in his *Dictionary* (1755); and, actually, violated the dictum for generality enough in his work in order to be seen as his own greatest adversary with regard to the principle. In fact, such internal agons are part of fine writing often enough to make such tension its own dictum. I see this tension in the legendary Napoleon, whom most historians say might have been a writer, a poet, if he had not been a key general. But more of

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that legend later. This short take is mainly about a young non-military, though fiercely aggressive writer, early in his career.

I have written here on David Randall, the Director of Research at the National Association of Scholars, before (“An Avenue to Truth in the Teleology of Rhetoric” *AQ* spring, 2020). Now I have read Randall’s second volume about the history of the Ciceronian notion of a mode of rhetoric he called *sermo* and will add my impressions of that book at the end of these comments about his role as an all-purpose *writer agonistes*—with, in fact, a nearly Miltonic combativeness in the intense world of NAS argument. I said in the review that I thought he was a good hire back in 2015, and here I want to elaborate on that opinion. Also, like several of my own graduate students who were training to work officially with “literature,” Randall has tried with some success, along with his doctoral work in British history, to market fantasy fiction. I find at least two titles of his in print published by the Margaret McElderry Children’s Division of Simon and Shuster. Recently, he sent me the manuscript of his latest fantasy in the Tolkien mode that his agent is trying to place. This one is a more adult fantasy and might be, he told me in a recent email, “possibly too politically incorrect” for a major publisher. I like his semi-outsider alien in this fiction titled *Soulfellows*. The character seems to me a nice mix

of Lovecraft and James Fenimore Cooper. He shapes, changes, and attacks, like painted native Americans in early New England, as the following passage from the second chapter of the manuscript indicates,

Most Sipangs stay human . . .
It’s just a few who have
soulfellows and turn beast. . . .
Don’t waste your time looking at
them. You look at the Sipang
himself and see when he turns
beast. . . . You can beat them . . .
. But it’s a tough fight at the best.
You always know you might end
up dead.

Tolkien himself, of course, had strong memories of his fighting experiences in the Great War. These vivid memories helped to fuel the fantasy wars he wrote, and he was a strong language scholar as well. I am not suggesting that any of my students or Randall is apt to grow into another Tolkien. Sadly, those heroic days in literature may be gone, although all writers hope to revive them. But Randall did pick up a nice opportunity for research and for argument, related to our colonial Indian wars, several years into his tenure at NAS as the Director of Research. The “1619 Project” that they rolled out in August 2019 was like salt on the still open wounds of racism in our country. The main contributions,

which dismissed America's rights revolutions as a series of empty, when not malignant, gestures was unnecessarily mean-spirited. The nation has made real and impressive progress on race over the years. In any case, such provocation could not be left unanswered—especially by an organization such as NAS dedicated to a firm defense of reasoned scholarship and free speech in a liberal education. Randall had gotten pretty good at colloquia conversations in his research role, and he wrote a long report. In fact, he came out quickly in October 2019 with the NAS “1620 Project,” including his own long document “How the *Times* 1619 Project Misses the Point,” that appeared on the NAS webpage. A shorter version of the report with the title “Missing the Point of Plymouth Rock” was picked up and published on April 6, 2020 by *National Review Plus*. Here is how his polemic in the *National Review* goes as he disputes a survey of the 1619 Project by a liberal historian whose position Randall calls “a facile resort to moral equivalence.” He is simply not having such easy thinking that denigrates the country. Fiercely, he will not accept that it is at all proper “to look at the endless details of Americans’ flaws, and not their sweeping aspirations.”

A much longer recent report of Randall's that was posted at the end

of 2019 deals with what he labels “radical social justice theory in higher education.” It is a very large report (448 pages at the website) and describes how leftist dogma now dominates higher education, “any ‘unfair distribution’ of goods among groups [race, class, gender] is *oppression*. . . . Such privilege must be eliminated.” His polemic in opposition to the theory is strong.

Thus I see Randall as a literary warrior. He is, also, a penetrating scholar. I liked his first book on *sermo*, which is the very peaceful activity of conversation, the *salonesque* mode of politeness and nonaggression that embodies the hope for “truth” rather than just “victory” over the enemy in argument. In the new study that is, also, published by Edinburgh University Press titled *The Conversational Enlightenment: the Reconceptation of Rhetoric in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (2019), he extends the history until just after the great revolutions of the period—The French Revolution that finally produced Napoleon and our own. James Madison and his writing in the *Federalist* is featured, nearly in a parallel position with Napoleon and his *Civil Code*, both rhetorical accomplishments that have been long-lasting in our civic and political lives and are seen as works of genius (for the latter, see the discussion by Georges Lefebvre). I would love to pursue further the peculiar juxtaposition of what Randall has to say on Madison

and what Lefebvre says on Bonaparte, but that would be a much longer essay. The hint for my strange idea came from the concise and brilliant summary of Napoleon's accomplishment as First Consul in Lefebvre. The genius of the legendary dictator resides in a similar tension with the writer I began with here. Napoleon has a huge ego and sense of his own destiny or fate. He wants power just for its own sake. But his motivation as a governor, also, is split across two principles: he wants to save the Revolution and, also, in the elaborate details of the *Code*, he wants to set up order and a system that has the permanence and the reliability of a "monarchy."

The latter point about size and scope and permanence is well reflected in the scholarship of Georges Lefebvre, himself as a scholar of the Revolution, not only in the book cited above as my epigraph but also in several other studies. The impression in this massive *oeuvre*, as I have admired it, is one of huge comprehensiveness. Lefebvre seems to know everyone, all the minor players as well as the major; his bibliographies are substantial. My point here is that when Randall works as an historian he seems

to have scholars such as Lefebvre in mind as his models. The detail of citation and the sense of sheer work is "kinglike" in its ambition. At the same time and as a writer always in the fray, Randall wants to protect free speech and liberal education. He also wants to entertain and even seems unobtrusively conscious of self-promotion. Some of the most interesting scholarship on Napoleon has been work that has uncovered his own self-promotion. As a general in the early days, he wrote his own dispatches in order to promote his performance. He did his own propaganda (See Wayne Hanley, *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796-1799*, 2005.) All these claims, including the overall juxtaposition in this short take, seem a little extreme to be acceptable; and so I think we need some humor to make them plausible. Here is Randall providing that humor at the end of his new scholarly book. It seems a good idea in this time of "fake news," but it is Madison speaking in a letter, "every newspaper, when printed on one side, should be handed to . . . an adversary, to be printed on the other, thus presenting . . . both sides of every question." (217-18)