

Jack Temple Kirby

Southern Historical Association, November 6, 2009

It will be thirty years ago next week that I first laid eyes on Jack Kirby. Jack chaired a session a friend and I had put together for the Southern Historical Association program in 1979. I knew his work, of course, but I wasn't particularly looking forward to this face-to-face meeting because when our papers failed to arrive precisely on the assigned day indicated in the program guidelines, Jack had fired off what struck me, in the arrogance of my youth, as a seriously officious missive about the obligation of program participants to meet the specified deadlines in order to assure the commentator adequate time to prepare appropriate remarks that, in combination with the papers, would promote lively and fruitful discussion, blah, blah, blah, blah. Too bad, I thought, I really liked this guy's book, but he sounds like he might have a little too much torque around his hind parts to suit me. As it turned out, of course, Jack in the flesh was not only the utterly disarming soul of collegiality but downright friendly to the point that a post-session beer or two had definitely been in order.

Before I knew it, we had fallen into the habit of having a drink or a meal together whenever we met up on the convention circuit. Looking back, we were quite an unlikely pair. Beyond the physical Mutt-and-Jeff thing, Jack was so enormously cosmopolitan and well read, while I, on the other hand, was both an unapologetic provincial and an equally resolute Philistine. Reflecting on some of our earliest conversations, I think the real bond for our friendship lay in our common descent from men and women of toil and soil. I can recall a number of times when he regaled me and anyone else in earshot with what, until recently, I had always taken to be heavily embellished tales of his latter-day proletarian forebearers.

It might seem surprising to some that such a refined man of letters would detail his generally blue-collar ancestry with such gusto, but in this case, as in all others, Jack's exuberance was every bit as genuine as it was inexhaustible. In fact, this, for me, was Jack's most endearing trait. When something struck his fancy or piqued his interest, by God, there was no stopping him. During his Yiddish phase, for example, I could hardly understand anything he said, and when I finally told him so in a thoroughly profane fashion, I succeeded only in provoking a wide grin along with the assurance, "Jimmy, you're a *mensch*." Later, after seeing Jack in the middle of his Fulbright year at Genoa, I was thoroughly convinced that the only way the Italians would ever be shed of him was to initiate deportation proceedings. I can only imagine his pure delight when, in the course of constructing his family tree, he found two ancestral branches in the Turin phonebook.

Incapable of doing anything halfway, Jack even threw his whole heart and soul into a mid-life crisis so epic in its proportions that it enveloped practically everybody who knew him—not to mention quite a few more who, up to that point, had not. Suffice it to say, it was a happy day indeed for anyone within his circle of acquaintances when he and Constance (Pierce) partnered up and his palpable misery and angst suddenly disappeared into a sense of happiness and a fulfillment that was every bit as obvious.

I need not add, I am sure, that Jack's passion for everything he undertook extended to his work and, for that matter, even to that of his friends and colleagues. One hardly need suggest how much fun he must have had doing Media-Made Dixie, for every lilting line of relaxed, engaging, and frequently puckish prose enshrouding every brilliant interpretive insight gives him away. In this regard, I have to say that while I have seen other historians use the term

“execrable,” Jack is the only one, to my knowledge, who ever deployed it in a reference to the Dukes of Hazzard.

Likewise, I must admit that it unnerved me just a bit, especially way back in 1997, to see one of my running buddies using the word “trope.” However, when I saw Jack calling in the New York Times, of all places, for some new southern “tropes,” because “telling the same old stories about the South over and over again” was accomplishing nothing more than “making northern whites feel good about themselves,” I could only wonder whether in this circumstance I could have mustered half the gumption to say something that needed so badly to be said, much less half the wit necessary to say it so well.

The late Mike McDonald was surely correct that in any contest to determine history’s most devilish title to repeat while drunk, Rural Worlds Lost would surely have been the odds-on favorite, although the book itself is more likely to induce sober, empathetic reflection on the human costs of what most would call progress. Like Rural Worlds Lost, the magnificent Mockingbird Song attested even further to one of Jack’s greatest gifts as a historian, his rare capacity to write about things that mattered a great deal to him without allowing his passion either to cloud his thinking or encumber his prose.

Jack Kirby richly deserved the chance to receive the applause and commendation of those who have long appreciated his elegant, enduring, and extraordinarily diverse contributions to their field of study. That this chance was taken from him--and us-- so unexpectedly gives me all the more reason for profound and painful regret that I am reduced tonight to saying *about* him all of the things that I wish so fervently I had gotten around to saying *to* him a long time ago.

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