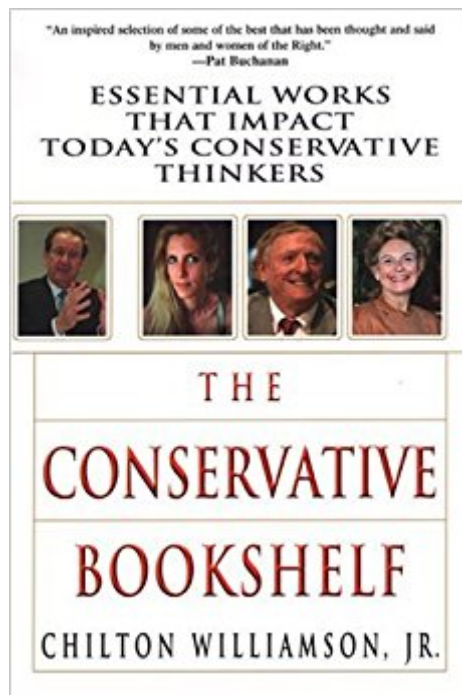


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The Conservative Bookshelf: Essential Works That Impact Today's Conservative Thinkers



Synopsis

The Conservative Bookshelf - Essential Works That Impact Today's Conservative Thinker
Chilton Williamson

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Customer Reviews

One doesn't have to read much of this excellent book to wonder whether its subtitle is wishful thinking. Many of the works discussed are demanding, the likes of Augustine's City of God, Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, and Richard M. Weaver's Ideas Have Consequences--hardly books that Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, or David Brock might curl up with. But as Williamson elucidates in the introduction, these books reflect conservatism, not the neoconservatism of current Republicans. And what is conservatism? "Man's willingness to discern for himself, and to accept from God, a fundamental, practical, just, human, and unchangeable plan for man--and to stick with it," Williamson says, later distinguishing two branches of conservatism, one "founded on eternal principles" and one "that appeals to historical context and the status quo, prudence, and pragmatism." Williamson presents 50 selected books in declension of categories, beginning with theology and ending with contemporary affairs. Book number 1 is the Bible; book 50 is Treason, by Anne Coulter, despite her support of the Bush administration. Ray Olson
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A work of scholarship that is a university course in itself---and more. An homage to the Old Right, it contains essays on the greats past and present: Burnham, Weaver, Kirk, the Vanderbilt Agrarians, plus Buchanan, Fleming, Francis, Clyde Wilson and Peter Brimelow. The man of letters is important, too. And so, the essays on Hemingway, Eliot, Solzenitsyn (sp), Waugh and Edmund Wilson. It'll keep you away from the TV screen, that's for sure.

I find it strange that many in Europe and other parts of the world see the US as a right wing nation, far from it (besides, the term is outdated and belongs to the French Revolution). "The Conservative Bookshelf" by Chilton Williamson, Jr., is an eclectic take on American conservatism. In this book, which is a commentary on selected works and people that have and may have influenced American conservatism, Williamson lays down his observations in his Introduction, where he tries to define conservatism and the political zeitgeist. He defines conservatism as "man's willingness to discern for himself, and to accept from God, a fundamental, practical, just, human, and unchangeable plan for man - and to stick with it." While Williamson plays into the language of many traditional conservatives, who are infact religious and put up with unclarified statements of religious sentiment, the question behind this quote is - what is the unchangeable plan for man? It should be noted that Williamson is a National Review "conservative" and a "conservative" Catholic of the National Review variety. Being a Protestant, from a Whiggish Anglo background, I gravely dislike the subversive tendency by Williamson and other "conservative" Catholics (e.g. Neuhaus, though himself probably still a neo-con), who draw from American conservative history, subvert Protestants to make themselves look the right and try to co-opt the history for their own position (e.g. p. 85, 136, 159, 187, 298, etc.). Not understanding the full cultural history within its own context, Williamson is the outsider trying to play the insider (The great tragedy of contemporary Protestantism is that while its churches are going through an identity crisis, it is allowing others to write its history and change the story). I would point you to Williamson's review "Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America: 1950 - 1985" from the National Review in 1994 for a more clarified reading on this man's position (It is also on the Web). One fatal error he makes is to position Patrick Buchanan as a mere pragmatist rightist. In fact, I think Buchanan, who is also Catholic, has a more proper understanding of the conservative American context and Constitutionalism, closer to Russell Kirk than the writer, and not a sentimental one like Williamson, who appears to be a rightist himself. Williamson is closely tied to the group of "conservative" Catholic thinkers who took over The Chronicles magazine. Their philosophy comes from the minds of Thomas Fleming, John Lukacs, etc., who draw their conservatism more from Pope Leo XIII, John Courtenay Murray, Hilaire Belloc, Evelyn Waugh and

William F. Buckley, who is not really a paleocon, but mixes Burkian reflections with pre-modern continental yearnings (read European). True American conservatism has its roots back through the Republican, Whig and Federalist parties, the American British colonial period, which has its roots in Whiggish and Puritan England and back to the times of the Tudor and Elizabethan settlement. It is not continental conservatism of the Hapsburg variety. What Williamson and others miss is that the anti-Catholicism of the old days was a real concern for Protestants, particularly in England, who were conspired against by pope, Jesuits and others (not mere irrational bigotry). The threat was real. This ended in America, at least for liberal Protestants, when JFK announced that his loyalty was first to the country and not the pope - he then won West Virginia, Texas and the country in 1960. For conservatives, this tended to end with the co-struggle against the Stalinist anti-religion grip of America by the left and the endemic problem of abortion in the 1970s and 80s. You see, the outcome was political and not religious, which still is a dividing problem for orthodox Catholics and Protestants. Religion must be based upon orthodoxy, but this is a struggle in a pluralist society. Early America was by and large pluralist Protestant. A lack of definition by the Founding Fathers has both helped and hindered this situation. Today, there is so much flip-flopping it is hard to tell who is what? Most are in the squishy mixed-up middle trying to get by in life. Traditionally, the laws of a people are grounded in religion, which is what Williamson really seems to be getting at but won't state it as the categorical solution. He most likely would want an American republic reconstituted away from traditional Protestant and 16th - 18th century British and American thought (particularly John Locke) to one redefined by Aristotelian logic and John Courtney Murray revisionism. To give him credit, Williamson starts with The Bible as the first text in religion and then notes Cicero's Republic, Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, The Federalist Papers and lists those whom I would call really the last of the Old Conservatives: Garet Garrett, Whittaker Chambers, Samuel Francis and the last of the Old Conservative presidential contenders Robert Taft, who passed away in the gray suit years of the 50s (no these were not the conservative halcyon days that liberals falsely pose, with McCarthy on the brain). Read the chapters about Garet Garrett, Samuel Francis, and Patrick Buchanan for cultural clarifications. Another point that should be noted in the undertow is the isolationism of the old conservatives was not a "stay the heck away from me", head in the sand view that the Roosevelt Democrats projected onto them, but a long held principled view that went back to John Quincy Adams on not intervening around the world in a quagmire attempt to make other nations like us. Calmly consider this in juxtaposition to Buchanan and other's critiques of the current administration's seeking to democratize problem spots around the world. Conservatives must look at the muddling of this position with honesty. Yet, there is more than meets the eye in

Iraq. In addition, please read the review by Paula Craig, who represents the views of many people in contemporary America, a mixture of different positions - see how she wrestles with Williamson's anti-environmentalism and her own conservatism. This is not to say she is wrong, but to reflect how there are a variety of "conservative" and for that matter "liberal" social platforms today, a confederation of worldviews. This is due to the erosion of traditional culture and multi-culturalism, among other social changes. Besides, shouldn't conservatives be concerned about conservation? Also read, Michael Kim's review, which shows how many today read conservatism. He is pretty accurate in his approximations. The neo-cons (or should I say, the neo-traditional liberals) and the Ayn Randian libertarians have also had their influence, but are not truly conservative, yet may hold to some sentiments. David Horowitz provides an important addition to the mix; I would call him a heterodox conservative. While not true to doctrine, he certainly is true to sentiment. His insight is important if you want to see how the far left think and act and how someone tries to make amends after being a destructive radical. While this book lacks a true meta-narrative, it should still be a lesson and observation on political and worldview positions, without fear of politically correct repercussions, to teach one to read broadly and seek to understand other views, so that one can understand one's own position within an historical context; so that one can be consistent within one's own position. Williamson's book is a contemporary observation looking back on a worldview that is getting harder and harder to discern.

There are some books that contain within them certain assumptions that may not be shared by the book's likely reading audience. Such is the case with this particular book. The author of this particular naval-gazing and highly idiosyncratic and partisan collection of books spends much of this book engaging in internecine conflicts with various other wings of the conservative movement, seeking to claim that only those he considers paleoconservatives are "true" conservatives in a manner that seems to consider political ideology to be an aspect of true faith, rather than viewing political positions as the outgrowth of the repercussions of one's belief system as a whole. For all of the author's hatred of ideology, this book is strongly ideological in ways that are often hypocritical and self-serving. The author, for example, continually praises the lost cause of the defeated South, and fails to see how the racial and social problems the author decries are in many ways the straightforward result of generations of oppression that the author sees no need to address or even recognize. All of what the author demands for himself, and presumably others of his kind, like a respect for family and property, as well as social and political liberty, the author sees

as particular and not universal rights. Straightforwardly seeking to roll back women's suffrage under the rubric of one family, one male head of household vote, the author demonstrates himself to be an unabashed reactionary fan of a particularist version of freedoms and rights based on race, class, and gender status. In the author's mind, the rights and freedoms we hold dear as Americans, and are willing to fight for, are not rights that the rest of the world is ready for, although the author appears not to have any particular test in mind by which those he considers unworthy of freedom and honor would be able to demonstrate themselves worthy. The political order of the kind desired by the author, and practiced by the self-professed master class of the antebellum South, is a school for civilization from which no one is ever permitted to graduate. In terms of its contents, the book is best when the author ceases his repetitive diatribes against the modern world and almost everything after Abraham Lincoln and actually quotes from many of the fifty books included here. The author places a total of 50 works into a series of categories: religion, politics, society, economics, the prophetic artist, and the present day and then ranks them in his own preference within those categories. The end result is a set of books that range from the obvious (the Bible, C.S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man*, Augustine's *City of God*, Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, Cicero's *The Republic*, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the Federalist papers, de Tocqueville's *Democracy In America*, Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*, the Education of Henry Adams, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, to give a few examples) to books that even well-read Conservatives are likely to have never heard of it (*The Camp of the Saints*, by Jean Raspail, *Revolution From The Middle*, by Samuel Francis, or Hilaire Belloc's *The Servile State*). Besides the list of books, which itself includes some very worthwhile quotes of the books that are being honored to be among the author's top 50, some of which are not in print and are exceedingly difficult to find, the author also uses the nominations as a way of discussing the entire body of work of the author, making this a recommendation for somewhat more than 50 books when all of the subsidiary recommendations are taken into account. Besides sharing an appreciation for books reading with the author, there are at least a few aspects of this book that are worthwhile to discuss. One of them is the general unprofitability of wrangling over words and definitions. When an author does not use the plain sense of a word, in the way that is commonly understood, or seeks to present himself as a self-appointed gatekeeper to how a given word is to be used, he moves from a fellow partner in the great conversations of ideas and opinions and seeks to become a judge of others by his own

personal standards. When an author has a worldview that is as two-faced and hypocritical as the author's, where the somewhat hyperbolic and paranoid view of the wickedness of the federal government is merely the same sort of domination and tyranny that the author himself endorses towards women and social and ethnic minorities, his placing of himself on a pedestal to look down upon others is particularly unwelcome. However, despite the unsavory and unpleasant nature of the author's political and historical worldview, and his clear absence of the universal desire to edify mankind irrespective of the particulars that often lamentably divide us, the reader of this book can at least appreciate the author's honesty, which is due to the fact that he appears to think he is talking to those who agree with him and so he drops the guard of polite fiction that he would adopt in speaking with outsiders and shows the reader what he truly believes, and shows how ignoble a fierce and temperamental resistance to change is when it is sheer mulish and obstinate stubbornness devoid of the right principles, rightly applied, that one ought to be stubborn in proclaiming and maintaining. It is not the pleasure one would wish out of a book about books, but one must take such enjoyment as one finds.

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