

R. Cort Kirkland, *Real Men: Ten Courageous Americans To Know and Admire* (Nashville: Duke Cumberland House, 2005).

188 pp. with end material, paper, \$12.95

Reviewed by Robert S. Griffin

Real Men is made up of profiles of ten men from the American past that author R. Cort Kirkland considers to be real men. Kirkland's ten: Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox," famed for his wily tactics against the British army; Eddie Rickenbacker, World War I war hero and later business success; Vince Lombardi, pro football coach in the 1960s; Rocky Versace, fighter pilot and POW in Vietnam; Wild Bill Hickcock, army scout, Indian fighter, lawman, and "perfect gentleman"; Lou Gehrig, baseball star in the '30s; Audie Murphy, World War II hero; David Crockett, frontiersman, entrepreneur, and congressman, who died at the Alamo; Andrew Jackson, soldier and president; and Robert E. Lee, Southern Civil War general.

"I picked the men profiled in these pages," Kirkland tells the reader, "by asking two questions: What kind of men do I want my sons to become? What kind of men do I want my daughters to marry?" He notes these ten men possessed "bravery, tenacity, rectitude, loyalty, faith, chivalry, obedience to God and just authority, and devotion to duty." They "embodied the traditional Christian conception of manhood defined in chivalry. They were honorable and honest, generous to varying degrees to foes, and solicitous and protective of women, children and animals. They did not brook insults, and they understood that some things were worth dying for. They had guts."

The ten profiles are engagingly written, and in several instances I was prompted to read full-length biographies. *Real Men* would make a good gift for a boy or young man; given today's schools and mass media, he will otherwise be very unlikely to encounter these lives or the ideals they represent. That said, I had problems with the book's message. I'll use one of Kirkland's ten real men, Audie Murphy, to illustrate the kinds of issues that came up for me.

Murphy was a Texan teenager whose daring-do against the Germans during World War II made him the most decorated combat soldier in that war. The notoriety he received for his war exploits

led to a career as a B-movie actor, primarily in Westerns. What Murphy did was indeed remarkable, standing alone on a burned-out tank mowing down Krauts with a machine gun, but how courageous was he really (the book's subtitle refers to "Courageous Americans")? I think of courage as being fully aware of the dire consequences that could follow from something—in this case getting your head blown off--and doing the right thing anyway. I don't think this kid realized the stakes involved in what he was doing; and more, he made it clear after the war that he loved every minute of it. Murphy certainly was good at killing—250 people, you try it—but then again, so was the Boston Strangler. In my eyes, real men think for themselves; they don't mindlessly go along with whatever anybody tells them to do. There is no evidence that at any time in Murphy's life he thought about how he wound up in Europe slaughtering his racial and cultural brethren and the justification of what he did in that war. Murphy dropped out of school, had serious problems with alcohol, drugs, and gambling, was a flagrant adulterer, had a series of run-ins with the law (including being charged with assault to commit murder), blew his money in get-rich-quick schemes, never did work he believed in, became increasingly miserable as the years went on, and grew a pot belly and died in a private plane crash at 46 chasing yet another shaky business deal. I'm trying to imagine myself saying, "Son, I want you to grow up to be just like Audie Murphy."

As I read the profiles, I thought about what all this was saying about my father, slight of build, manicured, deferring, who ten hours a day, six days a week, stood on his feet with his arms raised cutting people's hair, his shoulders throbbing as he got older, and rode the bus home every evening to be with my mother and me. And while there were repeated references to the ideal of a "Christian gentlemen," I couldn't pick up the difference between a Christian gentleman and just a gentleman, and I wondered about what this book was saying about me, a non-Christian.

Kirkland contrast between rough-and-ready, head-of-the-table real men and today's metrosexual softies plays well, but in my view he offers a simplistic and inaccurate characterization of the manliness of contemporary men based on a few media images. Indeed, boys, and men as well, should consider these ten lives, but not with the uncritical adulation reflected here. Rather, they should carefully analyze and assess these men, and think through how what

these men represent fits with who they are and their particular circumstance. And they should take into account the orientation and biases reflected in the list (Rocky Versace and not anti-war activist Tom Hayden, Vince Lombardi and not playwright Tennessee Williams).

And if we are going to talk about real men, we'll going have to talk about real lives, right here and now, yours and mine. You're 34, selling insurance for Aetna, dealing with hate stares from your ex-wife and her new husband when you pick up your daughter on visitation days, a thyroid condition is sapping your energy, and deep in your heart you think Christianity is Semitic voodoo. You're never going to be a swamp fox or a Christian gentleman. But you can try your best given the hand you've been dealt in life to do the honorable thing, day after day, year after year, win some, lose some, whether or not anybody ever acknowledges it, until the day you die. And if you do that, for my money you are a real man.

Robert S. Griffin's latest book is *Living White: Writings on Race, 2000-2005* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2006). His web site is www.robertsgriffin.com