

Weaver, Richard Malcolm, Jr. ^[1]

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by M. E. Bradford, 1996

3 Mar. 1910–3 Apr. 1963

Richard Malcolm Weaver, Jr., intellectual historian, rhetorician, and political philosopher, was born at [Asheville](#) ^[2] in [Buncombe County](#) ^[3], the son of Richard Malcolm (1870–1915) and Carolyn Embry Weaver, who was originally from Fayette County, Ky. He was the great-grandson of the Reverend Jacob Weaver (1786–1868), of Reems Creek, patriarch of the Weaver family in western North Carolina. Young Weaver was educated in the public schools of Asheville and of Lexington, Ky., where his family resettled in the years following his father's untimely death. In 1832 Dick Weaver took his A.B. degree from the [University of Kentucky](#) ^[4], where he was a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He enrolled at [Vanderbilt University](#) ^[5] in September 1933 and received an M.A. in English in 1934. He left Vanderbilt in 1936 without taking the terminal degree. Three years of teaching at [Texas A&M University](#) ^[6] (1937–40) strengthened his determination to finish his professional education and round out the sequence of studies that he had begun in Nashville with instruction from John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson. In the fall of 1940 he entered the Ph.D. program in the Department of English at [Louisiana State University](#) ^[7], where under the direction of Cleanth Brooks he completed his dissertation, "The Confederate South, 1865–1910: A Study in the Survival of a Mind and a Culture," in 1943. In this work Weaver laid the groundwork for his entire career. In 1944 he joined the faculty of the [University of Chicago](#) ^[8], where he remained for the rest of his life.

Dr. Weaver was an extremely productive scholar. The flow of his publications began while he was still in Baton Rouge, but increased rapidly once he had relocated in the North. In his 1950 essay "[Agrarianism in Exile](#) ^[9]," he described his situation at Robert Hutchins's university, Chicago (and that of a number of his mentors among the southern agrarians), as a "strategic withdrawal," an effort to gain an audience that he knew was not available to southern intellectuals so long as they spoke *from within the patria*. Having begun his research in a close consideration of southern intellectual history, he turned to examine the larger context of radical change within which the struggles of his own people had their most lasting significance. In 1932 Weaver had been a [Socialist](#) ^[10]. By the time of his arrival in Chicago, he had become a principled advocate of traditionalist conservatism. With the 1948 publication of his first important book, *[Ideas Have Consequences](#)* ^[11], he emerged a major figure in the postwar revival of intellectual conservatism in America. His policy had been to divest the vision of life inherited from his North Carolina forebears of its fortuitous regional overtones in idiom and preoccupation.

Soon Weaver became an advisory editor of *Modern Age* and a regular contributor to William Buckley's new magazine, *National Review*. His work covered a wide range of subjects, but his next book reflected his growing competence in a new area of specialization. With *[The Ethics of Rhetoric](#)* ^[12] (1953), Weaver became a leader in the restoration of the ancient discipline of rhetoric to its proper dignity as a basic component of a liberal education. His main argument in these studies was that corruption in the use of language has been a major source of the confusion concerning the hierarchy of human values so characteristic of our time. How a thing is said and what it means, he insisted, are inseparable. Some of his best work concerned the operation of concealed pleading in the diction of social scientists and politicians and in the structures of famous debates. Weaver wrote a rhetoric textbook. He also composed distinguished commentaries on the rhetorical design of famous texts from Plato and Milton. A posthumous collection of his rhetorical papers, *[Language Is Sermonic](#)* ^[13] (1970), contains further confirmation of his authority in this field.

In the last decade of his life, Weaver did a good deal of public speaking and produced some powerful commentary on the besetting political questions of the day. He was especially concerned by egalitarian attacks on his native culture, "the regime of the South." Philosophically this preoccupation resulted in his most important work in political theory, *[Visions of Order](#)* ^[14] (1964), and in the collection *[Life without Prejudice and Other Essays](#)* ^[15] (1965), a defense of the prescriptive approach to social questions and an attack on the utopianism of liberal schemes. But throughout the Chicago years Weaver had kept ready for the press the book that he had made out of his dissertation. This study, as *[The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought](#)* ^[16], finally appeared in 1968. To this opus he had planned to add an American Plutarch, a set of brief intellectual biographies matching figures from North and South. But there was not time to complete this final return to the intellectual interests with which he had begun his scholarly career.

In these last years Professor Weaver got back to North Carolina and Weaverville at every opportunity, to reassuring places, friends, and the magic circle of the blood. Furthermore, at the end of his life he was planning to leave Chicago and accept an appointment to the faculty of Vanderbilt University, where the odyssey of his intellectual life had begun. In moving to succeed Donald Davidson at Vanderbilt, he had completed the pattern and was, by general agreement, one of the most southern thinkers and conservative voices of his time. His public life was the solitary life of the mind. Yet a passion for dialectics was not the source of his achievements. During a 1950 family reunion, Weaver spoke of the necessity of knowing who you are and where you are from. Concerning these home truths he was not confused. Richard M. Weaver, who never married, died in Chicago and was buried at Weaverville.

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Authors:

Bradford, M. E. ^[35]

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