

The Decline and Fall of 'The Andy Griffith Show'

Believe it or not, I had never heard of Andy Griffith until I was forty years old. For some reason, *The Andy Griffith Show* had never made an impact on British television; at least, I have no recollection of ever seeing it, unlike other American sitcoms which had formed part of the backdrop to my childhood, such as *Bewitched* and *Here's Lucy*. It was not until I moved to the United States in 2001 that the existence of *The Andy Griffith Show* dawned on my consciousness, at which point I became aware that it held an affectionate and nostalgic place in the hearts of many Americans. Even then, I never really watched it until my wife introduced it into our family as "safe" and acceptable viewing for our children. And it was only over the past few weeks, while watching several episodes with our nine-year-old daughter, that I have come to realize that this iconic expression of American culture is not as "safe" or wholesome as I had thought.

The problem lies in the fact that the Mayberry that we see in the first few seasons is systematically undermined so that by the seventh and eighth seasons it has ceased to exist in all but the dereliction of its name, the iconic image of idyllic and idealized small-town America having been desecrated and destroyed by the iconoclasm of sixties' ideological hedonism. What is presented over the eight years and more than 200 episodes is the demise of Mayberry and all that it represents. What we witness and experience is its decay and disintegration, and ultimately its death. This was brought home to me after I watched several episodes from the first season, in which I basked in the almost prelapsarian warmth of the benign sun that shines forth on the idealized simplicity of the small and beautiful world in which Sheriff Andy Taylor lives, and then, immediately afterwards, I watched an episode

from the seventh season in which the ideal had been swept away by sixties "progressive" preachiness. In this later episode the simple but sagacious Sheriff of earlier seasons has become an emasculated shadow of his former self, passively embracing the feminist modernism of the female protagonist as she undermines traditional values at Mayberry's high school, encouraging her students to usher in the forthcoming summer of "love," which would lead to the loveless loneliness of postmodernist alienation. And thus the timeless moral verities that had formed the solid foundation of Mayberry had succumbed to the quicksand quagmire of relativism, sinking without trace into the desert of the urbanized wasteland. And all with Sheriff Andy's approval.

Being moved to contemplation by this disconcerting experience, I found myself comparing the idealized world of Mayberry with the idealized world of Hobbiton, the home of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins in Tolkien's mythical Shire. It seems to me that Mayberry and Hobbiton move our minds and touch our hearts in similar ways. They are places in which our exiled hearts can feel at home. They show us an ideal to which the better part of ourselves wishes to aspire, an inkling of a perfection to which, paradoxically, all our imperfections point, the latter being merely the perceived lack of the former.

There is, however, a crucial difference between Sheriff Andy's Mayberry and Frodo Baggins' Hobbiton. Whereas Mayberry suffers the scourge of modernism, succumbing to its sweet-tasting poison and thereby ceasing to be, the Shire suffers the same modernist scourge but is scoured and restored to health. After the hobbits return home from their quest, they discover that their beloved homeland had succumbed to industrialization and the crass materialism and big government socialism that is its consequence. Instead of capitulating and moving with the times, as does Sheriff Andy, they fight with indomitable courage to defeat the modernist enemy and to heal the culture which had been contaminated by it. The Shire is *scoured*; it is

cleansed and purged.

And this is perhaps the lesson that we can learn from the decline and fall of Mayberry, as distinct from the death and resurrection of the Shire. The process of decay leads to death, and if we believe that there is nothing but decay we can expect nothing but death. This is the deadly price of decadence. If, however, we believe that the very heart of life is love, and that love is inseparable from a dying to ourselves, we will see that this sort of death always leads to resurrection. If we truly learn to love our neighbours and to love our neighbourhoods, laying down our lives for them in the spiritual death which is the essence of love, we can scour the Shire and rekindle the vision of human dignity which makes Mayberry feel like home. If we truly wish to make America great, we need to love her back to life.

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