

Influences III

If I were a guest on a podcast or an interview broadcast, when asked about my major influences, I would stick close to the names repeated by voluntaryists — Spooner, Bastiat, Jefferson, Mencken, Mises, Hazlitt, Rothbard, Higgs, and Woods. But in this more expansive context, I can stretch out to discuss the influences who made me a voluntaryist before I knew I was one, before I knew to read the internal literature of the voluntaryist, libertarian, individualist mainstream. Three such influences are Alan Turing, Dan Carlin, and Ruth Rendell.

Alan Turing

Recently, I watched the great movie, *The Imitation Game*. First, this caused me to check my list of influences to make sure that Alan Turing was there. The movie focused on Turing's cracking of the Enigma Code, and it nodded toward the sexual preference in Turing's life. It did not mention in any concrete way that Turing changed our lives forever beyond saving the world from the Third Reich.

I often play "Stump the Professor" with my students by challenging them to name a walk of life that functions without computers. The last serious suggestion was farming, about 20 years ago. That was mainly true at the time — not anymore. The last desperate guess was hairdresser, about 10 years ago (I responded to that by asking how the hairdresser communicates — by telephone then, by multiple electronic means now).

I am a pilot of Turing Machines. As are so many of us in the modern world. Many more are passengers, but I know where some of the nuts and bolts are.

Because of people like Alan Turing, John von Neumann, and Vannevar Bush, I returned to school at the age of 45, to get more degrees, in computer science, after my first in English two decades earlier.

Of the three great men, I must choose Alan Turing even though he was the most troubling (I do not refer to the aspect of his life for which the British government killed him). His intellect is so vast it is impossible to judge his potential, or the potential effect going forward.

While the cracking of the Enigma Code changed the course of human events, it is beyond our grasp what Turing may have wrought if he hadn't been immersed in the Enigma problem, or if his creative space had not been constrained by persecution and early death at the hands of the very government and culture that he saved.

It would be a thankless toil to estimate the effect of his code-breaking accomplishment, but

it would be an endless loop to delimit his growing influence on the world of tomorrow. This is the idea that has influenced me and my life so much.

Can you imagine what you would not be doing if your actions were not related to the Turing Machine?

We have called them computers for the last 50 years, yet they are Turing Machines. We recently have changed to calling them devices, because they come in so many shapes and sizes, yet they are Turing Machines.

Dan Carlin

It was almost 8 years ago, when I discovered the power of podcasts in the hands of a personality, such as Dan Carlin. Eight years later, I still think of him as the best podcaster, the most professional and the most dedicated to the new medium. Not only that, he is articulate, blessed with a unique view, and scholarly without pedantry. His main work is *Hardcore History* by which he has delivered what, in my view, are indelibly memorable and gripping recountings of World War I, Genghis Khan, and The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire. He enlivens these marathon works with exhaustive research. Just look at the bibliography at the foot of this page. He is not a professor; he's the best history nerd you have ever heard. He has rekindled the history nerd in me.

Secondly, Dan uses his particular perspective on history to make commentary on current events in a podcast called *Common Sense*. The web site promotes it as follows:

What is Common Sense? Dangerously thoughtful. Common Sense with Dan Carlin isn't a show for everyone, and that's what makes it so great. It's a smart, deep, passionate, engaging, inquisitive and of course, politically Martian view of news and current events. There's nothing else like it.

I cannot tell you a fraction of what you will realize on your own listening. Most other podcasts will try to entertain you, with the personalities even acting buffoonishly to try to distract you from the pedestrian content. Not so with Carlin. Dan keeps you attending every word with all the sweep, emotion, mystery, and surprise of the real events as though you are there and your fortune hangs from those events (it does, and Dan knows it).

The blurb above mentions a Martian outlook. One of Carlin's tools is to adopt the kind of objectivity that a wise visitor from another planet might have. He has no earthly political axes to grind. His only agendum is a desire to end the corruption that sullies human

behavior but makes no common sense. Even though he is a self-labeled military history *aficionado*, he does not shy away from the central question of war and its place in the moral landscape of history.

Dan Carlin's shows occupy a place in my mind that makes him one of the most influential people in my history. I have only been exposed to him for just under 8 years, but he has a primary place in my 7 decades of experience. I could offer you no better advice, if you don't know this man, than that you go, immediately upon reading this piece, to DanCarlin.com, to discover a new world of insight.

Ruth Rendell

Ruth Rendell is the first woman about whom I will have written, but not the last. It is fitting that I begin with her since, before Rendell, discovered by me in the early 70s, my encounters with literature consisted entirely of male authors.

Rendell is also the first mystery writer about whom I will have written, in this series, but not the last. In the sixties, I had found Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Ross MacDonal, and in the 50s, my schoolboy years, I was a ravenous reader of Sherlock Holmes, as envisioned by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. But Ruth Rendell's work was a significant departure from these works. Maybe she wasn't better a mystery writer, but in terms of art and a grasp on the human pageant, she took no back seat.

While Doyle was a master of structure, logic, and ingenuity, and the three mid-century Americans (although MacDonal was born in Canada) were purveyors of mood, atmosphere, surprise, and personal moral codes, Rendell added so much more. Color and richness were the least of her strengths. She dealt in psychology, individuality (even eccentricity), happenstance, and unforeseen consequences.

Ruth Rendell also is probably the only politician, in a customary sense, that I number among my major influences. She was a member of the British Parliament's House of Lords from 1997 until her death in 2015.

Her literary fortes were complexity (even the simplest events had deep undercurrents) and the more complex unforeseen consequences stemming from them.

To name 3 of her best books:

- *The Speaker of Mandarin* — the first Rendell volume, for me, introduced me to her one recurring leading character, Inspector Reginald Wexford, a staid but wise observer of the contemporary scene. Her police procedurals are excellent, obeying the rules, but are not the most spectacular of her books, satisfying more than thrilling.
- *King Solomon's Carpet* — this was my personal favorite, written under her pen name of

Barbara Vine. This is a novelized history of the London Underground, set within a multi-plotted modern mystery, which appealed to my jonesing for both urban rail and whodunits.

- *Portobello* — Here Rendell celebrated a market street through the center of Notting Hill, draping upon it a stunning collection of characters from many walks of life, whose experiences converged through complicated happenstance.

Her writing excels via the McGuffins (compulsions) that she attaches to each major character. Each has his or her own quest, very idiosyncratic quests. Most other writing does well to have one McGuffin.

Conclusion

Of course, Alan Turing is well known and unique in the history of the development of humanity. He made a major breakthrough in the way the future would evolve. His contributions cannot be reversed as long as humans survive as a species. On the other hand, Carlin and Rendell are neither widely known nor the only purveyors of their ideas. But they are unique and powerful conduits of those ideas. Dan Carlin examines the corruptibility of statist society, from a point of view informed by a powerful grasp of history, coupled with an undying hope that objective review of facts will move us forward. Ruth Rendell weaves her tales through the endless, kaleidoscopic possibilities of human interaction among singular individuals.