

Forrest McDonald's Remarks about Mel Bradford
Philadelphia Society 47th National Meeting
Dallas, Texas, April 2, 2011

The first thing to note about Mel Bradford, assuming that a number of people in the audience have never seen him, is that Mel was an enormous human being—a physically imposing presence. Mel would not have been a small pro-defensive tackle. The first time that I viewed him I was overwhelmed. He took the podium at a professional meeting wearing a cowboy hat and boots, and afterward I told Ellen (who had not been there) that he appeared as a gigantic Texas Ranger, even having the impression of indentations at his hips where he customarily wore six-shooters.

As I got to know him, I came to realize that was a mighty big man intellectually as well. He had majored in English for his Ph.D., and he taught English at the University of Dallas and published a considerable body of literary criticism. He was described as a disciple of the Vanderbilt agrarians, or Nashville agrarians, as they are sometimes called—the likes of Robert Penn Warren, Richard Weaver, Andrew Lytle, and Frank Owsley—who rather romanticized and glorified the Old South and its traditions and values. Indeed, Mel thought of himself as being in that school; he published essays styling himself as such. But he was also a prolific, provocative, and profound historian who could best be titled Philosopher/Rhetor.

Let me illustrate by anecdotes. Mel had a running debate with Harry Jaffa, carried on in *National Review* and various scholarly for a. Jaffa maintained that Lincoln was a great American hero for folding the egalitarianism of the Declaration of Independence into the Constitution. Mel countered that Lincoln had thereby undermined the Constitution, changing it from “nomocratic” document—a law designed to govern government—into a “teleocratic” instrument designed to fashion a particular kind of society. On one occasion the debate took place at a Philadelphia Society meeting in New Orleans. As lunch was ending, Jaffa began his presentation. The waiters and busboys—all of whom were black—noisily went about their serving coffee and dessert. Then Mel began to speak, and one by one they stopped clearing the tables and started listening, lining up respectfully at the side of the hall. When Mel finished they joined enthusiastically in the applause.

Mel's talents were legion. Mel autographed a copy of his *Reactionary Imperative* for me, and along with the signature he wrote, in Latin, a lengthy inscription. (He also disclosed his full given name—a name I dare not speak aloud.)

Another example: late in the evening at a Liberty Fund colloquium, Mel and Ellen and I were talking. Everyone else had gone to bed. We began discussing opera, and it turned out that Mel was not only well versed on the subject, opera had been his preferred career. He wanted to be a Wagnerian baritone and had sung an extra in major productions. Amazingly, he began to sing for us. He had a beautiful voice.

A particularly dazzling display of his erudition occurred at another Liberty Fund conference. The discussion was turning around an obscure historical point when Mel took the queue and began to hold forth on English history during the 1640s and 1650s. I cringed when he started to talk, for I knew—as Mel apparently did not—that among those present was the historian Jack Hexter, who happened to be America’s (and maybe the world’s) foremost expert on the subject. I watched Hexter as Mel talked on and on; he listened attentively but with no perceptible expression. When Mel finished, several of us turned to Hexter to hear his response. He said, “that was utterly fascinating. I never thought of that.”

That’s the kind of knowledge Mel carried around with him, and he did it modestly and unassumingly. To top it off, he was a kind, gentle, and good man. Those of us who knew him, loved and counted ourselves blessed.