

Southern Cross

The meaning of the Mel Bradford moment

By David Gordon

“YOU JUST CAN’T attack Lincoln and get away with it—you just can’t.” Hearing these words, spoken in front of a portrait of Lincoln at the Rockford Institute in 1989, is my first memory of Mel Bradford. That remark, delivered in an accent characteristic of the Texas-Oklahoma border that was his home country, reflected the wounds of an incident that brought him to national attention.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan intended to nominate Bradford as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The appointment seemed entirely appropriate: Bradford, a professor of English at the University of Dallas who wrote his doctoral dissertation under the Southern Agrarian and Fugitive Poet Donald Davidson, was a distinguished literary scholar. But Reagan’s wish to elevate him to the prestigious post did not stem solely from Bradford’s academic credentials. The president and he were acquaintances, and he had worked hard in Reagan’s campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Influential conservatives such as Russell Kirk and Sen. Jesse Helms also knew and admired Bradford.

But a Southerner who stressed localism was not what neoconservatives such as Norman Podhoretz and the Kristols, *père et fils*, had in mind. They preferred William Bennett and, in typical fashion, did not confine themselves to magnifying the paltry virtues of their favorite, but launched smears against the president’s choice, dredging up Bradford’s 1972 support for George Wallace and—the issue that they stressed

interminably—his criticism of Abraham Lincoln. Their efforts to portray Bradford as some latter-day Theodore Bilbo, however unwarranted, proved effective. Bennett received the nod.

The campaign hurt Bradford greatly. But if he knew in advance that attacking Lincoln was so dangerous, why did he do it? Because far from being some crank spoiling the schoolchild consensus, Mel Bradford had principled reasons for his critique—and he deserves to be remembered as far more than a footnote to neocon machinations.

No one who met Bradford could easily forget him. He was strikingly tall and weighed about 350 pounds. He wore a white Stetson and would often look at people sideways, holding his head at an angle. On one occasion, he stopped a punch about an inch from someone’s face without looking at him. (In his youth, he had been an amateur boxer.) “That’s how I keep my graduate students in line!” he laughed.

Bradford began his career as a literary scholar, not a political theorist, and was perhaps best known for his work on William Faulkner. He had no truck with critical efforts to portray Faulkner as alienated from the South. To the contrary, he saw the novelist as thoroughly embedded within his native region. The trouble with other academic interpreters was that they failed to recognize their own prejudices of place: “Most of these mandarins teach in the universities of our Northeastern Megalopolis,” Bradford wrote. “Concerning the rest of the Republic, they have only conven-

tional responses proceeding not from reflection but from fear, ignorance, and animosity. That this other America, in all of its antique multiplicity, should foster or possess serious literature is for them a contradiction in terms.”

The relation of a writer to his local community and culture was a *leitmotif* of Bradford’s literary scholarship. Indeed, his stress on the importance of place in literature informed his political views. For Bradford, true politics grew out of local tradition. As he put it in his presidential address to the John Randolph Club in 1990, “The American regime ... is and forever shall be the result of a practice, a network of common experience and well-established institutions united in a common way.”

Bradford rejected Lincoln because he saw him as a revolutionary, intent on replacing the American Republic established by the Constitution with a centralized and leveling despotism. He thought that James McPherson, perhaps the most eminent pro-Union authority on the Civil War, was perfectly right to say in *Drawn With the Sword*,

Negative liberty was the dominant theme in early American history—freedom *from* constraints on individual rights imposed by a powerful state. The Bill of Rights is the classic expression of negative liberty, or Jeffersonian humanistic liberalism. The first ten amendments to the Constitution protect individual liberties by placing a strait-jacket of ‘shall nots’ on the federal

government. ... Whereas eleven of the first twelve constitutional amendments severely limited the power of the national government, six of the next seven vastly expanded those powers.

McPherson welcomed those later amendments and Lincoln's drive toward centralization that had paved the way. Bradford rejected them.

The original understanding of the Constitution, Bradford maintained, conformed much more closely to the Southern position than to Lincoln's acts of usurpation. In *Original Intentions*, Bradford highlighted the fact that the Framers did not even approve of James Madison's plans for a strong central government, let alone the monarchical aspirations of Alexander Hamilton. Madison wanted the central government to have the right to veto acts of state legislatures, but this found little favor with most of the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention.

As even the chastened Madison admitted, the ultimate authority for interpreting the Constitution was the understanding of its provisions held by the delegates to the state ratifying conventions, since the votes of these delegates actually established the new government. These conventions were alert to the danger that a central government might try to take away the sovereignty that properly belonged to the peoples of the states, and they consented to the new arrangements only on condition that their rights were upheld. Later work by Kevin Gutzman has fully confirmed Bradford's analysis: the Virginia Convention, for example, explicitly reserved the right to leave the Union if the new government exceeded the powers granted to it.

But why does this matter? Suppose Bradford was correct that the South had the better Constitutional argument against Lincoln over secession. The

issue is even more pressing because Bradford himself did not think that secession had been the best course of action. He was in sympathy with Alexander H. Stephens, an Old Whig who wanted to preserve the Union while resisting Lincoln's policies.

To draw out the wider ramifications, we must introduce Bradford's principal intellectual antagonist: Harry Jaffa, a disciple of Leo Strauss and longtime professor of political science at Claremont College. In *Crisis of the House Divided*, Jaffa argued that America had been founded on the clause in the Declaration of Independence that held it to be self-evident that "all men are created equal." Lincoln, more consistently than the Founding Fathers, saw the implications of the equality clause. Slavery, the "peculiar institution" of the South, must be set on course toward "ultimate extinction." Though Lincoln professed willingness to accept the Constitution's guarantees of states' rights, the seceding Southern states had little doubt that he intended to proceed radically against them.

IN JAFFA'S INTERPRETATION, **CALHOUN WAS A PROTO-FASCIST, WHO UTTERLY DENIED THE NOTION THAT INHERENT RIGHTS RESTRICT GOVERNMENT.** JAFFA MIGHT HAVE SUBTITLED HIS BOOK *FROM CALHOUN TO HITLER*.

In Jaffa's rendition, Lincoln was guided by "the laws of nature and nature's God" to which the Declaration professed adherence. Jaffa contrasted this principled observance of natural law with the Southern position, best exemplified by John C. Calhoun. In Jaffa's interpretation, Calhoun was a proto-fascist, who utterly denied the notion that inherent rights restrict government. Jaffa might have subtitled his book *From Calhoun to Hitler*. Indeed, he extended his *argumentum ad Hitlerum* to contemporary conservatives who rejected his ver-

sion of egalitarianism. He said that the "distinctive American conservatism" political theorist Willmoore Kendall sought to discover in the historical habits of the American people "would be a distinctive American fascism, or national socialism" because "the consensus that [Kendall] revered was one that embodied within itself the legal sanctions given to the institution of slavery."

Bradford rejected all of this. What Jaffa saw as the policy of liberty and free government Bradford viewed as the path to tyranny, and the two scholars battled it out in numerous exchanges in *National Review* and *Modern Age*. (They remained on good terms personally, however, and Jaffa supported Bradford for NEH chairman.) Bradford struck at Jaffa's central contention about Lincoln and modern political philosophy. Lincoln favored equality; but how, Bradford asked, can equality be brought about? Only by the government's pursuit of a policy of constant leveling, in which those who excel are held back for the alleged advantage of

less well-off competitors. Such a Procrustean course of action is the antithesis of liberty, not its guarantee, as Jaffa wrongly thought.

In "The Heresy of Equality," included in his anthology *A Better Guide Than Reason*, Bradford considered an objection to his thesis about equality. His strictures applied only to equality of result; but is not equality of opportunity an entirely different matter?

Bradford did not think so. Efforts to secure equality of opportunity will inevitably lead to the leveling policies of

more radical egalitarians. If, for example, someone from a poor family cannot avail himself of the educational advantages that are open to the wealthy, does he really have the same opportunity for advancement? To secure genuine equality of opportunity, the state will have to compensate the less affluent. Equality of opportunity leads to equality of result. As Bradford put it, “equality achieved is the mainspring, the central teaching of the Left’s secular theology ... the kind of equality of opportunity that insists on the right results in every contest.”

This argument, probably Bradford’s most important contribution to political philosophy, gains support from an unexpected quarter. Independently of Bradford, John Rawls advances the same argument in *A Theory of Justice*. Like Bradford, Rawls thinks that genuine equality of opportunity requires the pursuit of substantive equality; but, in contrast to Bradford, he favors this pursuit. Bradford did not think the price worth paying.

There were further grounds on which to criticize the 16th president. For Bradford, Lincoln’s magniloquent declarations of support for natural law could not be accepted as they stood, but must be analyzed for their rhetorical effect. His attempt to do so, in “Lincoln, the Declaration, and Secular Puritanism: A Rhetoric for Continuing Revolution,” got him into serious trouble with Bennett’s supporters. In a footnote, Bradford pointed out that Hitler had referred to natural law in *Mein Kampf*; is that not a striking illustration of the fact that such language is empty of meaning until its realization in practice is spelled out? His antagonists pounced. Bradford was equating Lincoln with Hitler! Of course, he did no such thing. But as we saw to our cost in the propaganda barrage that led to the Iraq War, truth has little significance when it stands in the way of a neocon endeavor.

Bradford wanted to return to the original understanding on which our Republic had been founded, but one might ask whether he correctly understood the Founding. What about the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence? Do these not advance just the sort of universal commitment to rights that Bradford rejected?

He was ready with a response. In his view, the heart of the Declaration was an assertion of the people of the American colonies that they were no longer bound to Great Britain. He took the equality clause that so excited Jaffa as little more than persiflage. He noted that among the grievances of the Declaration against George III were complaints that the king had set against the colonists “merciless Indian savages” and that he had “excited domestic insurrections [i.e., slave insurrections] amongst us.” Evidently slaves and Indians were less equal than others.

Regardless of the historical circumstances of the Declaration, however, must one agree with Bradford in rejecting appeals to natural rights altogether? If Lincoln and Rawls must go, do they have to take John Locke with them? As a libertarian, I would say no, but Bradford disagreed. Everyone acquainted with the history of political thought knows Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, but his *First Treatise* is little read. This was a reply to a defense of patriarchal monarchy by Sir Robert Filmer. Bradford was one of the few modern writers who thought that Filmer had the better of the argument, as he makes clear in his contribution to *Saints, Sovereigns, and Scholars: Essays in Honor of Frederick Wilhelmsen*. (Wilhelmsen, a distinguished Thomist philosopher, was Bradford’s friend and colleague at the University of Dallas.)

Bradford utterly rejected Locke and natural rights for the same reasons he criticized Lincoln’s rhetorical effusions. Rights lacked meaning in the absence of

concrete applications. But cannot a supporter of natural rights meet this challenge by saying in detail what he takes to be the universally valid rights? Bradford, as always, had an answer at hand—in this case, one greatly influenced by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and his key work, *After Virtue*. MacIntyre contended that the terms of an ethical theory make sense only within a particular historical tradition. Universal rights were the product of what he called “the Enlightenment Project,” which had now collapsed. Bradford concurred and favored a return to local tradition, particularly that of the South, in place of the universalizing tendencies of the Enlightenment.

Bradford’s rejection of natural rights by no means put him in opposition to most of the policies advocated by contemporary libertarians, however, and the foremost 20th-century defender of Lockean liberties, Murray Rothbard, was a friend of his. They stood together during the first Bush administration in battling “the monstrosity of big-government conservatism.” In denouncing the growth of an increasingly demanding central government, he was at one with the libertarians, though they defended their opposition with different arguments. Even persons inclined to see more in Lockean rights than Bradford did will gain much from studying his work.

He died in 1993, well before conservatism had plumbed its current depths, but Mel Bradford’s stirring words still call us to action: “We must thunder against equality produced and required by the power of the state and live to confront big-government conservatives at the point of their most serious compromise with ordered liberty.” ■

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Heartbreak Hill

For the past nine years, I've spent two hours a week at a volunteer job on Capitol Hill. When I tell the newer counselors when I started they exclaim, "Nine years?"

You must've seen everything!" I wonder how Parisians—or Athenians—must feel when they visit America and see our shop signs: MURRAY AND SONS, EST. 1957.

Nine years is nothing, yet in official Washington, outlasting an administration is an accomplishment. Capitol Hill is the place where the cliché that Washington is a transient town becomes most vivid. The groups colonizing familiar corners of the Hawk and Dove bar shift and change, faces vanishing and getting replaced like the parts of the philosopher's axe. Then summertime comes—intern season! Unleashed by the colleges on an unsuspecting nation, they move in cheery, callow packs through the think tanks and congressional offices and happy hours. These bright bits of sparkly fluff are the happiest boys and girls in Washington. They've never heard the phrase "West Germany" and think Al Gore was the candidate of a "humble foreign policy." I'll never understand the sexual appeal of interns. Although they clearly have something—in college we'd joke about the incoming class of "refreshments"—they're about as sexy and as knowing as a lollipop.

In election season, you work around the clock, downing beers in the office as you watch the results come in. In the off-season, well, there's a reason they call it "recess."

This is the place with "Southern efficiency and Northern charm," the place nobody should live too long—"inside

the Beltway." When people move here, burn out, and write whining columns for the *New York Times* about "life in Washington," this is where they lived. (So it's their own fault.)

But even in Washington-the-dateline, you can catch glimpses of D.C. the hometown. Even in the neighborhood of white domes and guided tours, eternally misguided D.C. wanders in: a deer broke through a plate-glass window once and staggered through the Capitol like a Saturday night in Adams Morgan. In 2002, a fox sneaked into the Supreme Court building. Security cameras caught the fox entering, but no fox ever left. Local legend suggests that it evaded capture by turning into Justice Scalia.

In Union Station, the interns stand left and walk right in defiance of local escalator culture. Deaf students from Gallaudet University mall-rat in sign language. Walking east, you slip into a neighborhood of young families and group housing—two kinds of each. One kind of young family wields giant canvas-hooded strollers of German construction, Baby's First SUV. The other young families, with their stronghold farther east, push castoff strollers from cousins. In one kind of group home, friends band together to share expenses, host art shows in the living room, park a tiny backyard grill at the top of the fire escape, and fight about the refrigerator. In the other kind, a group home is the place where your case-worker will discuss whether or not they have to let you in.

D.C. is mostly a springtime town, but I've found that Capitol Hill is most beautiful in the early summer twilight. Northeast of the train station is the neighborhood where I usually see the first mulberries of the season, and then the first fireflies, and then the first bees. As the sun sinks below the skyline of official Washington, the night-blooming flowers lift and unfurl their graceful white trumpets. The neighborhood smells like honeysuckle and cheap barbecue, overblown roses and thin cigars.

This place feels safe to me, even though the volunteers from Maryland or Virginia insist on driving me to the subway after dark. In D.C. safety is a sliding scale. There are two women who sit on their stoop here, smoking and muttering dark imprecations like the Graeae missing a sister. Sometimes, when they're especially outgoing, they vulture for spare change from passersby. On bad days, they scream at their neighbors and make physical threats. When Jane Jacobs praised urban neighborhoods with "eyes on the street," I don't think the Weird Sisters were what she had in mind.

Is Capitol Hill safe? Is anywhere? It was in this neighborhood that a young receptionist took me aside and lifted up the back of her blouse so I could see the bruises she'd taken from her boyfriend. "Do you think it's a problem? I mean, I know I should leave him, but ... do you think it's really a problem?" Dateline Washington has its young people—so, for our sins, does hometown D.C.

Official Washington can disappoint you, but only home can break your heart. ■