

MEL BRADFORD'S SCHOLARLY LEGACY AT 20

Sean R. Busick and H. Lee Cheek Jr.

The late Mel Bradford (1934–1993) was truly one of the giants of the postwar conservative intellectual movement. A Texan (born in Fort Worth), Bradford earned his BA and MA degrees in English at the University of Oklahoma before going to Vanderbilt for his PhD. At Vanderbilt from 1959 to 1962, he studied under Donald Davidson, who was probably the most faithfully conservative of the twelve southern agrarians besides Andrew Lytle. Under Davidson's guidance, Bradford produced a dissertation on William Faulkner. After graduation, he taught English at several schools before ending up at the University of Dallas in 1967. He

would remain at Dallas until his untimely death in 1993.

As a writer, Bradford was an essayist. He collected and published his essays in half a dozen major books. *A Better Guide than Reason* (1979), *A Worthy Company: Brief Lives of the Framers of the United States Constitution* (1982), and *Original Intentions: On the Making and Ratification of the United States Constitution* (1993) all deal with the Revolution and early republic. In this same vein, he also edited one of the first agrarian manifestos, John Taylor of Caroline's *Arator* (1977), and coedited (with the southern conservative constitutional-law expert James McClellan) *Elliot's Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (1989).

Bradford's other books, *Generations of the Faithful Heart* (1983—the title is taken from the last line of Davidson's great poem "Lee in the Mountains"), *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (1985), and *The Reactionary Imperative* (1990) deal broadly with issues of southern literature and conservatism. Bradford also edited a number of important books: a

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collection of Andrew Lytle's essays, titled *From Eden to Babylon: The Social and Political Essays of Andrew Nelson Lytle* (1990); the first collection of critical essays on Lytle's work, *The Form Discovered: Essays on the Achievement of Andrew Lytle* (1973); and the book that Richard Weaver, another student of Davidson as well as of John Crowe Ransom, had made out of his dissertation, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought* (1968).

He was also one of the fifteen scholars who again took their stand by contributing an essay to Clyde Wilson's volume *Why the South Will Survive: Fifteen Southerners Look at Their Region a Half Century after "I'll Take My Stand"* (1980). Additionally, Bradford wrote scores of essays for *Modern Age*, the *Intercollegiate Review*, *Chronicles*, and many other journals. And then finally, he was working on a biography of Davidson when he died. Eventually the Davidson biography was finished by the late Mark Royden Winchell.

Bradford was a southern agrarian conservative, although he preferred to call himself a reactionary: "Reaction is a necessary term in the intellectual context we inhabit in the twentieth century because merely to conserve is sometimes to perpetuate what is outrageous," he wrote in *The Reactionary Imperative*. He was, in this respect, like John Lukacs, who described reactionaries thus: "A reactionary considers character but distrusts publicity; he is a patriot but not a nationalist; he favors conservation rather than technology; he believes in history, not in Evolution.... A reactionary will recognize how... An Idea Whose Time Has Come may not be any good."¹ Bradford would have added a hearty "amen." So he was a southern agrarian conservative, or "reactionary." It is

important to note the order of these labels. He was a southerner first, and because he was a southerner, he was also both an agrarian and a conservative. Bradford's southern identity so thoroughly permeates his life and work that there is little need to dwell on it. However, considerably less attention has been given to his agrarianism.

Paul Murphy, in his recent and uneven study of southern agrarians from *I'll Take My Stand* to the present, *The Rebuke of History*, is the exception. He treats Bradford as one of the most important modern heirs of the southern agrarian tradition, along with Wendell Berry (the Henry County Kentucky farmer-novelist-poet-essayist), John Shelton Reed (the Chapel Hill sociologist who has spent his career studying southern culture), and Clyde Wilson (the historian from the University of South Carolina who is the world's foremost authority on John C. Calhoun, as well as the editor of *Why the South Will Survive* and the Bradford festschrift, *A Defender of Southern Conservatism*).

There are some problems with Murphy's book, but he has probably identified the four most prominent modern disciples of the Twelve Southerners Who Took Their Stand. But only one of them, Berry, is what we might call a practical agrarian. Berry lives the agrarian life—however, we should note that his agrarianism does not derive from *I'll Take My Stand*; he only read it *after* taking his personal stand in Henry County. As for the other three, they are what we might call political agrarians. To the best of our knowledge, neither Bradford nor Wilson ever even kept a home garden. We have less personal knowledge of Reed, but we doubt he keeps much of a garden either. This does not make them hypocrites. Of the Twelve Southerners who contributed to the original agrarian manifesto, few had much real experience on the farm. Many of them were also politi-

cal, rather than practical, agrarians. Indeed, even Thomas Jefferson struggled as a farmer. None of this takes away from their sincerity and seriousness.

One of the common threads that connects Bradford's (as well as Wendell Berry's and Clyde Wilson's) thought to the agrarianism of the Twelve Southerners is what Richard Weaver (another Vanderbilt graduate) called "social bond" individualism. Writing of John Randolph of Roanoke, Weaver observed, "By instinct Randolph was perhaps a secessionist—every individualist is a secessionist in regard to many things. Individualism is a rejection of presumptive control from without. But Randolph never lost sight of the truth expressed in Aristotle's dictum that man is a political animal. His individualism is, therefore, what I am going to call 'social bond' individualism. It battles unremittingly for individual rights, while recognizing that these have to be secured within the social context."² This "social bond" individualism that Weaver identified has been one of the distinguishing characteristics of both agrarianism and southern conservatism. And Weaver was not just another agrarian. He was essential to understanding agrarian thought. Bradford believed that Weaver *completed* the moral and political enterprise of the original agrarians.³

The heart of the agrarian moral and political enterprise was recognition of the threat posed to traditional communities and ways of life and thought by industrialism and applied science. The agrarians saw, earlier than most, that industrialism and applied science were not simply benign ways of improving our material standard of living. Rather, they were ways of organizing society. When enlisted in the causes of Progress and Equality, industrialism and applied science dissolved the traditional social bonds that united individuals and held society together.

Centralization was substituted for "social bond" individualism. No longer would society be held together by individuals who were bound to each other in their natural families, churches, and communities. With traditional bonds dissolved, society would be held together only by uniting each individual to a centralized state—that is, society would be held together by force instead of love.

The agrarians believed that society should be organized on a human scale. And, because they accepted the idea of original sin and St. Augustine's vision of the City of Man and the City of God (that the City of Man was finite and corrupt and therefore could never be perfected), they rejected any faith in certain Progress or the perfectibility of man.

"*Because they were Southern* (and hence rather more European by inheritance than American intellectuals from the north or west), the political vision of the Agrarians conformed not at all to the familiar native political categories: in a word, they were neither 'liberty men' nor 'equality men,'" Bradford explained in his essay "The Agrarianism of Richard Weaver." "Their measure of any polity was its human (and not its legal or economic) product. As a body they were doubtful about 'Progress'—and even doubtful that the appearance of the 'progressive,' post bellum United States on the stage of history was in the long run to be of *certain* benefit to Western man."⁴

Here, too, is how Bradford explained it in his essay "The Agrarian Tradition": "For the Agrarians, the measure of any economic or political system was its human product. Goods, services, and income are, to this way of thinking, subsidiary to the basic cultural consideration, the overall form of life produced. Of course, the Agrarians were anti-egalitarian. They knew the abstract drive toward Equality... to be the mortal

enemy of the patriarchy. And thus they agreed that, though some have providentially five or three or only one talent, every man should be encouraged to become as independent as he can be.”⁵ In sum, southern conservatism (which, for Bradford, is really indistinguishable from agrarianism) is religious and based on our submission to God.

One of Bradford’s favorite passages in *I’ll Take My Stand* is the paragraph in the “Statement of Principles” that begins with “Religion can hardly expect to flourish in an industrial society. Religion is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our role as creatures within it.”⁶ Furthermore, southern conservatism is decentralist, antiegalitarian, antiprogressive, and still anti-industrial. The southern conservative favors local autonomy and true self-government—he or she believes, like the Founders, that republican self-government depends upon virtue, that is, upon our being able to govern our individual selves.⁷

Bradford’s interest in the Founding follows naturally from his agrarianism. He believed that, unlike the French and Russian revolutions, America’s was a conservative revolution. Both the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were conservative documents. According to Bradford, the American colonies revolted to preserve self-government, not to embark upon a progressive path toward Utopia. This insistence upon the conservative nature of the Founding brought him into conflict with liberals and progressives, because “since our country crossed the Great Divide of the War Between the States, it has been more and more the habit of our historians, jurists, and political scientists to read the Continental Enlightenment, and the Age of Revolution that was its political consequence, back into

the record of our national beginnings by way of an anachronistic gloss upon the Declaration of Independence.”⁸

He believed (as Gary Wills has also stated) that this “anachronistic gloss” upon the Declaration could be traced to Abraham Lincoln, who, at Gettysburg, read the Declaration’s inalienable rights into the Constitution by refounding the nation on the proposition that all men are created equal. Bradford, then, attempted to restore a true conservative understanding of the Founding, and to refute Lincoln’s refounding of the regime, while always affirming its original integrity.

His attempt to restore a conservative understanding of the Founding led to a series of famous exchanges with Harry Jaffa (and his epigones), and this is, probably, what Bradford is unfortunately best known for today. Jaffa argued that the Declaration was a revolutionary document. That it founded America on the principle of equality. That “equality... is then both good in itself and good for its consequences.” And that “the rooting of constitutionalism, and the rule of law in a doctrine of universal human rights, in the political act of a people declaring independence, *is* unique and unprecedented.”⁹ Jaffa and some of his fellow Straussians then argued that the natural law idea of universal human rights that they found in the Declaration is also the guiding principle of the Constitution and provides the surest means of interpreting the Constitution. In Jaffa’s view, equality and universal human rights are the “deferred promise” of the Declaration (and the Constitution), which it fell upon subsequent generations to fulfill by continuing the radical American Revolution.

Of course, the problem with this, as Barry Shain has recently observed, is that two things are missing from Jaffa’s account: “facts and common sense. Simply put, Jaffa’s

claimed connection between these documents is offered wholly without evidence.”¹⁰ There is not a single shred of evidence that anyone at the Philadelphia Convention or any of the state ratifying conventions believed that the Constitution incorporated a natural law understanding of universal human rights from the Declaration. Nevertheless, Jaffa has criticized Robert Bork, Russell Kirk, former attorney general Ed Meese, and Supreme Court justices Rehnquist and Scalia for failing to interpret the Constitution in light of his understanding of the Declaration, accusing them of being disciples of John C. Calhoun. In fact, Jaffa hubristically argues that he alone is capable of correcting all the alleged misinterpretations of the Constitution.¹¹

Bradford responded to Jaffa that equality was not a conservative principle. “Contrary to most Liberals, new and old, it is nothing less than sophistry to distinguish between equality of opportunity...and equality of condition.... For only those who *are* equal can take equal advantage of a given circumstance. And there is no man equal to any other, except perhaps in the special, and politically untranslatable, understanding of the Deity.” The only way such equality can be achieved is for it to be enforced by a totalitarian central government. And people will demand that it is enforced because “envy is the basis of its broad appeal.... Furthermore, hue and cry over equality of opportunity and equal rights leads, *a fortiori*, to a final demand for equality of condition.”¹²

“Contrary to Professor Jaffa, it is my view that the Declaration of Independence is not very revolutionary at all,” wrote Bradford. “Nor the Revolution itself. Nor the Constitution. Only Mr. Lincoln and those who gave him support, both in his day and in the following century.” The Declaration simply “confirms an existing state of

affairs.”¹³ By July 1776, Americans had been fighting the British for more than a year (since April 1775). The battles of Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, and Sullivan’s Island had already been fought. Congress had created the Continental Army, with George Washington at its head. The colonies, led by Virginia, had already begun individually declaring their independence and adopting new constitutions that did not recognize the authority of either King or Parliament in their affairs.

In July 1776 a British army was descending upon Long Island, and the king had declared Americans to be in rebellion and outside his protection. As Pauline Maier, the foremost authority on the Declaration, has said in response to Straussian attempts to incorporate it into the Constitution as one of our nation’s founding documents: “The Declaration is not a founding document. It is a de-founding document.”¹⁴ That is, it did not found a nation; it was a secessionist document that declared the dissolution of a nation.

The idea of the “deferred promise” of equality and universal human rights was grafted onto the Constitution by Lincoln and subsequent generations of liberals. It was not present at the Founding. Most of Bradford’s primary objections to Lincoln stem from his “misunderstanding of the Declaration as a ‘deferred promise’ of equality.” He argued that “Lincoln’s ‘second founding’ is fraught with peril and carries with it the prospect of an endless series of turmoil and revolution, all dedicated to freshly discovered meanings of equality as a ‘proposition.’” Bradford called this peril a “millenarian infection” that could arm and enthrone a Caesar who would be empowered, through the rhetoric of the “deferred promise,” to “reform the world into an imitation of themselves.”¹⁵

After two decades, we can conclude that Bradford's vision of constitutional renewal was hopeful. As he affirmed in one of his favorite passages from *I'll Take My Stand*, a passage he often quoted himself, "This much is clear: If a community, or a race, or an age, is groaning under industrialism, and well aware that it is an evil dispensation, it

must find a way to throw it off. To think that this cannot be done is pusillanimous. And if the whole community, section, race, or age thinks it cannot be done, then it has simply lost its political genius and doomed itself to impotence."¹⁶ Bradford knew that it can be done. †

- 1 John Lukacs, *Confessions of an Original Sinner* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1990), 3–4.
- 2 Richard Weaver, "Two Types of American Individualism," in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, ed. George M. Curtis III and James J. Thompson Jr. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 82.
- 3 M. E. Bradford, "The Agrarianism of Richard Weaver," in *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 74.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 5 M. E. Bradford, "The Agrarian Tradition," in *Remembering Who We Are*, 86–87.
- 6 Twelve Southerners, "Statement of Principles," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), xxiv.
- 7 M. E. Bradford, "Southern Conservatism," in *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Bruce Frohnen, Jeremy Beer, and Jeffrey O. Nelson (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 802.
- 8 M. E. Bradford, "Not So Democratic: The Caution of the Framers," in *Remembering Who We Are*, 37.
- 9 Harry Jaffa, "Equality, Justice, and the American Revolution: In Reply to Bradford's 'The Heresy of Equality,'" *Modern Age* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 115–16.
- 10 Barry Alan Shain, "Harry Jaffa and the Demise of the Old Republic," *Modern Age* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 480.
- 11 "Do I not bring philosophy down from the heavens and into the city—making it practical and political—when I demonstrate by my critiques of Kendall, Bradford, and Wills, that their doctrines are merely varieties of Confederate doctrine, and that the vital center for their beliefs is derived from John C. Calhoun? Do I not do that even more profoundly, when I show that the 'Marx of the Master Class' is not, in the crucial respect, so very different from Marx himself, since the proslavery attack on free society, and the Marxist critique of capitalism, closely coincide?" (Harry Jaffa, *American Conservatism and the American Founding* [Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1984], 136).
- 12 M. E. Bradford, "The Heresy of Equality: Bradford Replies to Jaffa," *Modern Age* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1976): 62. Also see Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 186 and elsewhere.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 14 As explained by Professor Maier to the paper's authors.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 16 Twelve Southerners, "Statement of Principles," xxx.