

T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr.

## Not in Memoriam, But in Affirmation: M. E. Bradford

One year ago, March 3, 1993, America lost one of her most accomplished literary and social critics, M. E. Bradford—scholar, educator, gentleman, and great friend to this journal. I first came to know of Mel Bradford through his writings in the quarterly journal *Modern Age*, and almost ex-

caption as it flashed upon the screen, and with no small gusto.

It is an unforgettable tableau, but then so much about Mel Bradford is unforgettable. His is a unique voice. Far more than a scholar, he was an authority—not due to the depth of his scholarship, though that was abundantly present, but rather a special authority born of the breadth of his learning. Bradford understood that a proposition is more true or less true to the extent that it coheres with other truths. Thus he always connected men and events, not only to their contemporaries, but to their intellectual antecedents—if appropriate, all the way back to the ancients.

This sense of connectedness, or more precisely, of rootedness, led Mel Bradford



PROFESSOR M. E. BRADFORD ON "THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN ORDER" AT ISI'S SOUTHERN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE IN FEBRUARY, 1992.

actly 20 years ago met him in person at a gathering of the North Carolina Conservative Society. I walked into a room where the sponsors were showing the silent film classic "Birth of a Nation," a pro-Southern rendering of events surrounding the War Between the States. There in the darkened hall, with scores of college students at his feet, sat Dr. Bradford—reading aloud each

to become one of the great synoptic minds of our own age. Only Russell Kirk matches M. E. Bradford for the sheer expansiveness of his erudition. It is no accident that these two men were first respectful colleagues, and then affectionate friends. Kirk, the great

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Tory interpreter of the Old Whigs. And Bradford, an Old Whig himself, the genuine article.

Mel enjoyed a good controversy, but his enemies were not persons. Rather, as with Burke and the Old Whigs, his enemy was the ideological abstraction, or the argument from definition, as he most often called it. Against the enveloping darkness of such armed doctrines, he held aloft the lamp of experience—and when Bradford was at his best, what a light was there.

Mel Bradford might be called the philosopher of memory. He counselled us to know ourselves, not through introspection, but through recollection. He bade us honor the winnowed teachings of our fathers, and our fathers' fathers. The word "patrimony" flowed readily from his pen. Above all, he exhorted us to remember and nurture the densities of meaning revealed and preserved in the great currents and quiet eddies of our cultural past. Let us take up the task, and let us begin with the life and work of M. E. Bradford.

Mel Bradford leaves behind many intellectual allies, disciples, and a body of writing that stands alone in modern letters. And there is more to come. At least two new editions of earlier books are in the works, and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute is planning to publish his uncollected essays under the title "As I Was Saying"—a title he

proposed to me just two weeks prior to his untimely death at age 58.

In my distress at the news, I said to his wife Marie that Mel's passing had left a hole that the rest of us cannot fill. Marie responded, "No, it has left a mountain." And of course, she is right. So many of the lives he helped to shape will go on to shape other lives, and his writings will instruct and delight generations yet unborn.

Mel Bradford took ill in harness—at a meeting of the Texas equivalent of the Philadelphia Society, the Landrum Society, which he helped found and guide. From his hospital room before the operation, he took telephone calls and made them. To one caller he confided that, despite the many battles he had fought, there was no rancor in his heart. He had long talks with Marie and in general held court. In short, he was himself.

Against the millenarian tides of his century, Mel Bradford taught us to live in piety toward the world as God created it. At the end, he taught us how to leave that world for a better place. We grieve for Marie, their son Douglas, and the family's inconsolable loss. We grieve for our own loss of an irreplaceable friend and mentor. But there is no call to grieve over the life and death of M. E. Bradford. You see, he has left behind a mountain, and we have yet to scale its full dimension.

"We cultivate the arts of memory, and thus hope to preserve to our posterity the bond which has heretofore (and I borrow from Burke linked together among us 'the dead, the living, and the yet unborn.'"

—M. E. Bradford