

McDermott as a Colleague

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Although I took one class with John McDermott at SUNY Stony Brook, I write as a colleague who came through the ranks under his mentorship at Texas A&M from 1980 to 1997, when I left College Station to assume the Joyce and Edward E. Brewer Chair in Applied Ethics at Purdue University. I came to Texas A&M during the transition from McDermott's term as the Head of the Department of Philosophy and Humanities to the leadership of Professor Hugh McCann. It was a heady time in Central Texas, and especially in philosophy. Texas A&M was itself undergoing rapid growth in both the size of its student population and in the research output of its faculty. The 1980s, in particular, was a time when a faculty member in any randomly chosen department (aside from A&M's agricultural programs, which had long attained excellence) might have presumed that his or her colleagues were performing at a level far above that of the general reputation of the university as a whole. It was not until the 1990s that we looked around and began to recognize that everyone (well, almost everyone) was doing scholarship that would not have been imagined or expected from Texas A&M faculty in the 1970s.

McDermott was very much a part of this transition, and it would be difficult to overstate his influence on the general academic climate at Texas A&M. He had come in response to a national search for a new Head for the Department of Philosophy, and had emerged, I was told, as a candidate with far more robust scholarly credentials than was typical for the mid-'70s. By the time I arrived in 1980, he had achieved something of an aura throughout A&M's College of Liberal Arts for the enthusiasm, drama and verve that he brought to all aspects of his professional life. McDermott presented himself first and foremost as a teacher of undergraduates, a man whose pedagogy was summed up by the E.M Forster aphorism "only connect." At an institution that had always been shaped by the nearly rabid enthusiasm of its former students (we were not allowed to call them alumni, let alone "former" Aggies), McDermott had in four short years established a reputation of one who would *insist* upon reaching even the most recalcitrant, laconic and disinterested undergraduates, shaking their foundations and bringing them to consciousness of a larger world. The Aggies loved him for that, and faculty throughout the university loved him for communicating that this was what a university professor was supposed to be.

Through means to which I am not privy, McDermott facilitated the creation of a Faculty Senate at Texas A&M and served as its first Speaker. He represented the ideals of democracy within the university to an administration (seemingly, the entire State of Texas) where big men (the gendered term is used advisedly) were used to having their way. It was also a time during which McDermott was at the peak of productivity in his own scholarship, and with reputation-making and field-defining anthologies of James, Dewey and Royce already behind him. At a university where one might have expected STEM faculty to take a jaundiced view of the humanities, McDermott soared. All the disciplines carried him on their shoulders as the very model of what they personally and the university in general were aspiring to accomplish.

At the departmental level, McDermott worked from the pose of a co-conspirator. Faculty meetings and departmental events took on the aura of a clandestine rendezvous where thieves and scoundrels plotted with revolutionaries and soldiers of fortune at advancing their respective causes within a hostile environment. McDermott would speak in hushed tones as he would say sooths projecting our successes and bolstering us for the trials ahead. He was, to put it more prosaically, for you and for promoting whatever you thought philosophy might be. He was against every machine, from the university administration to the American Philosophical Association that might stand in the way of this pursuit. He did this (somewhat amazingly) without compromising the sense that what you did would have to be excellent in order for you to achieve tenure or promotion. That's how I experienced him, and I think that to some degree or another, every member of the department felt somewhat the same way.

Departmental life was, in a word, rambunctious. This was due less to McDermott than to the colorful group of philosophers that had assembled in the Wild West of A&M's department prior to John's arrival. They were bright and well-educated men (again, the gendered term is used advisedly) who may have relied a bit too heavily on each other for an intellectual and emotional outlet prior to John's arrival. They had the air of the Wild Bunch, brawling, boozing and whoring their way through the scholarly life, reconciling the image of "philosophe" with that of Jett Rink, the character portrayed by James Dean in the film *Giant*. McDermott held his own in this atmosphere, and I do not think I ever left a departmental affair when he was not still there, holding forth and defending his turf (sometimes physically) in the melee of personalities that surrounded him. I think they loved McDermott even as he was turning the department into a place where one would actually need to do good philosophy to prosper. Several of them followed him in that turn, and no one opposed it.

One specific anecdote: When I first arrived to spend a year as a Visiting Assistant Professor, McDermott invited my wife Diane and me over to his house. No one was home but him, and he bravely cooked us dinner on the charcoal grill in his backyard. I remember him telling me that I could apply for a permanent position that was being established jointly between philosophy and A&M's College of Agriculture. He spoke of what I would accomplish, helping to establish a new professional organization, serving on the board of new journals, and becoming known as a foremost philosopher of agriculture. (And all that happened, pretty much). At the same time, I was preoccupied with the prodigious amounts of lighter fluid that he was applying to the charcoal, and then by the flames that would have cautioned any low-flying pilots who happened to be passing by. The scene was intoxicating. McDermott was always clear that you would have to do for yourself, but he was also the colleague that had everyone's back.

Not long after his term as Speaker of the Faculty Senate, Texas A&M established a new College of Medicine, and McDermott quickly turned his attention to the creation of a medical humanities program, and to the spiritual enlightenment of the medical students. This activity came to occupy a significant amount of his energy during the last decade that we shared as colleagues. The frenetic tempo of the early days slowed and the department culture stabilized. McDermott came to be less central to daily life in the department, but he always participated in decisions where personnel or matters of policy were on the table. His message was to ensure that we maintained our humanity above all else, and I don't think any of us ever doubted that he had our back.