

THE McDERMOTT EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

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Professor John J. McDermott died on September 30th, 2018. When I discussed this special issue with him before he died, he was intrigued to find out what submissions we would receive. Alas, he was only able to read one of the finished essays, but I wager he would be encouraged that every contribution to this issue is from one of his former students. Some of these students go all the way back to his early New York City days in the 1960s and '70s, and others are from some of the last Texas classrooms he filled with his presence before his death. Many of the essays in this issue directly discuss McDermott's contribution to James studies, but they also contain stories, anecdotes, testimonies, and examples of cultural and lived moments of experience that McDermott contended were essential to understanding the beating aesthetic heart of American philosophy, and William James in particular.

John J. McDermott had a singular and profound impact on the trajectory of classical American philosophy. His reintroduction of primary texts through edited volumes of James, Peirce, Dewey, and Royce, as well as his role in the foundation of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, produced the groundwork for the contemporary revival of American philosophy. Of particular

note for this special issue of *William James Studies* are his contributions to William James scholarship, including *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, first published in 1967, his role as General Editor for the twelve volumes of *The Correspondence of William James*, his many articles and essays on James, and his unique application of radical empiricism to the modern world. This issue includes his last published essay on James. In combination with the tens of thousands of students who passed through his classrooms over his sixty-seven yearlong teaching career, McDermott has both shaped and nurtured the study of James and the larger scene of American philosophy.

At the time of his death, McDermott was University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Humanities in Medicine at Texas A&M University. He was also Presidential Professor for Teaching Excellence, Regents Professor, and Piper Professor. McDermott was the quintessential American intellectual, and his research and publication contributions will indefinitely echo in the discipline. Yet, his legendary reputation as a pedagogue possibly surpasses even his purely scholarly efforts, although as many of the essays in this volume contend, the two were often conjoined.

Speaking now of my own experiences of Professor McDermott, I have been, and continue to be, his student. From 2007 until his death, I had the good fortune of working with him on almost a daily basis in a variety of capacities. I first spent five years as his research assistant, and one of the responsibilities of that position involved archiving his letters and correspondence. McDermott was many things, but near the top of the list must be “archivist.” Not counting what has been included since his death, his personal archive contains 436 boxes. They are well-packed, and meticulously organized, labeled, and catalogued. One “upshot” of holding this position was that I was in contact with hundreds of former students. I remain continually astounded by the gratitude expressed by students who made contact after not having done so for five, ten, thirty, or even sixty years. Most were simply writing a letter to McDermott to say how they have carried their experience with him throughout their lives. It would not be appropriate to discuss any of them specifically,

but many expressed general themes that are illustrative. I already admired and knew that he was a great man before I came to Texas A&M to study with him, but the letters from former students solidified for me the suspicion that he was also a good man. Intimidating, gruff, free to speak his mind and challenge what he saw as injustice, I knew his passion, but the letters showed that he had been effective not only in helping his students grow, but he also empowered them individually and in their service to others. These testimonials came almost weekly. In a time where assessment has cast a gloomy statistical shadow over academia, I can think of no greater outcome than to have a student continue to draw inspiration from a classroom after years of genuine reflection on what went on there. So, what did go on in his classrooms? Many of the essays in this issue offer takes on the magic of the McDermott classroom, but I can't miss a chance to offer my own brief attempt to try to explain.

McDermott was a master of the content, of course, and he was famous for his lecture style and the unique community he built in each course. It was also the *how* of McDermott: How he treated students and their worries, concerns, and problems. How he inspired and encouraged them to challenge and know themselves. His recognition that our students' lives are, without exception, difficult and full of struggle, and so we ought to be kind to them. How he modeled what it meant to be an authentic intellectual, a serious academic, engaged and thoughtful and always looking to help others, no matter what they needed help with. McDermott's special disposition was ubiquitous, and inseparable even from casual conversations, which, for me, were often punctuated by a poke in the chest and a command that whatever experience we had just shared was an important one. Whether the conversation was about why you should not trust a 1941 DeSoto to get you to your dissertation defense on time, or what character traits make a good point guard, the link between his pedagogy and his overall way of being in the world was unbroken. The inseparability of his person and his pedagogy was part of the impression he left on students. It was genuine, in the most real use of that word I have ever known.

I had the good fortune of being able to speak with him every day about these sorts of things, and I cherish it, as many former students emphatically told me I should. The range of interests of these former students speaks to the inclusiveness of his care for them. Sure, there are those who study James, Dewey, Royce, and Peirce, but there are also those in literature, sociology, architecture, medicine, education, and those outside academia—all of them encouraged by Professor McDermott to sate the fire of their interests by committing passionately to them. McDermott did not push unless one wanted to be pushed, because he held firmly to the model espoused by Dewey that students' interests cannot be created, but once initiated it is a waste to not let them blossom—and then he will push, and poke, and encourage, and inspire.

McDermott taught right up until the end, despite being in tremendous pain and knowing he probably didn't have much time left. His last course was a graduate seminar on the philosophy of John Dewey. He died partway into the semester. I was one of the many to pitch in and teach some of the remaining classes. It was intense, both as the loss remained so close and because stepping into his classroom and filling his brown boots was impossible. I have since found that expressing my gratitude and debt to him in writing has also been nearly impossible. Consequently, I am doubly grateful to the contributors of this issue for their words. A brief introduction to the essays in this issue follows.

Professor McDermott himself wrote the first and last entries in this issue. The first is a poem entitled "Their Time is Up—And Mine?" It is, as far as I know, the last poem he wrote. At least, it is the last poem he showed me. I look forward to the day when a collection of his poetry is made available, although that is a task for another day. I read this poem at his graveside funeral, which also included bagpipes, drums, and an electric guitar. The poem shows both the awareness McDermott had of his situation during the last year of his life, and his gratitude and appreciation for those whom he missed. The line in the poem that includes the initials R.W.S. refers to Ralph W. Sleeper.

Richard Hart's "The Owl of Minerva Landed Amongst Us" recounts his early encounters with Professor McDermott in the early 1970s and discusses some consistent threads throughout his academic work, as well as what Hart calls "...a variety of practical, in-your-face pedagogical strategies and techniques I long ago stole from him..." (5)

David Sprintzen's "McDermott in Memoriam" opens with the aesthetics course McDermott taught in the 1960s and '70s, which was "a Queens College cultural event of the first order." (22) Sprintzen details his more than half a century association with McDermott and offers stories of how he "would make regular pilgrimages back to visit John's classes, to be personally re-energized, intellectually stimulated, theoretically re-focused, and practically re-engaged in the ongoing tasks of cultural and political reconstruction." (24)

Linda Simon, who was also a McDermott student at Queens College in the 1960s, writes of her experience of taking Western Civilization with a young Professor McDermott who had just completed his doctoral dissertation. In "A Student's Memory of John McDermott," she notes that for him:

it was clear that pedagogy was more than theoretical: It was urgent. And teaching was not merely a matter of exposing students to great men and their great ideas but leading these credulous young people to doubt—those ideas, and themselves—opening them, as he once put it, "to novelty, surprise, and the dismaying message" that their beliefs "may have been self-foreclosing." (29)

Simon favorably compares McDermott to the accounts of William James's own pedagogical method and reflects on the overlapping themes in McDermott's published work and his message to those who took his courses.

John Kainer's essay "The McDermott Walk" elaborates on "the life-changing assignment he gave me, and the remarkable difference he has made and continues to make in my life and the lives of my students." (34) Kainer is a recently graduated sociology doctoral student from Texas A&M. He was first drawn to sign up for one of

McDermott's courses in 2015 out of curiosity about the stories and his fabled status on campus, and "over the course of the semester, proceeded to be more confused, confounded, understood, and cared about than at any prior point in my education." (34) Kainer became one of McDermott's students from then on, and even spent some time helping to organize, sort, and trying to make everything fit at Professor McDermott's home library, which included a personal collection of over 35,000 books.

"Robert Pollock's Influence on John McDermott," by James Campbell, compares the work of these two figures in American philosophy and shows how Pollock's published work and time as McDermott's doctoral advisor impacted McDermott's thought. It also contends that there is a fundamental difference between the two thinkers, specifically "on the religious meaning of the American experience." (56) Despite this difference, McDermott's praise for Pollock remained consistent throughout his life, and he often went out of his way to credit Pollock. The essay also includes a timeline for Pollock's life and work and was the only essay in this issue that McDermott read before his death. This is why the essay concludes with the sentence: "Further work, perhaps autobiographical work on McDermott's part, might enable us to understand why he did not fully adopt the positions of Pollock." (56)

The last essay is a reprint of McDermott's final published essay on William James. "A Jamesean Personscape: The Fringe as Messaging to the 'Sick Soul'" was delivered as the William James Lecture on Religious Experience at Harvard Divinity School in 2010 and was originally published in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. In archetypal McDermott fashion, he included his phone number with the published version of the lecture, along with an invitation to call him if any of those who read it wanted to have a conversation. It is a masterpiece that encapsulates the best of McDermott's unique writing style. He interweaves his vast knowledge of both the writings and person of William James with figures such as Tolstoy, Goethe, Carl Jung, Gerald Manley Hopkins, Heraclitus, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, and Walt Whitman, among others. For McDermott, no poet, novelist, critic, academic discipline, science,

or religious screed, from any time in history, was ever ruled out as a source of wisdom. Drawing from this, he makes a sustained analysis of James's concept of the "sick soul" from the *Varieties*. He offers his own personal story as a lens to untangle and understand the concept; namely, his struggle with alcoholism and the subsequent decades of sobriety and active involvement in the Alcoholics Anonymous community.

In closing, I include the last lines of his obituary, which he, of course, wrote himself. In the months leading up to his death, when it became clear to him that his body was failing, the obituary went through numerous drafts and revisions. He taugth to the end, but he also maintained his tried-and-tested method of yellow legal pad pages packed with marginalia, asides, and handwriting that only a handful of folks have confidence in deciphering. He approached the task of writing about his own death with the same determination to do good work, the same existential awareness and temperament, and with the same pragmatic and pluralistic ideals that he approached every task and every day. He writes at the end:

"I send blessings to all who have crossed my path and wishes for a peaceful death. Try to remember that the nectar is in the journey! Farewell."