

Forrest McDonald

Model Historian

There is a compliment that I occasionally receive in which someone praises the research that went into *The Language of Liberty: A Citizen's Vocabulary*. I'm always flattered to hear this, but it never turns my head. That is because I've read enough to know how much more research many scholars, at least the better sort, have done in their careers. A case in point is Forrest McDonald, a historian I admire a great deal.

McDonald published more than a dozen books that covered a range of subjects, but the heart of his scholarly work concerned the Founding of the nation and its first decades. His first on this period was titled *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution*, published in 1958 when McDonald was still a young academic, barely 30 years old. The story of its publication and reception are worth telling. It grew out of a remarkable adventure in research, with McDonald spending two years traveling throughout the east, visiting various state and local archives, and examining records, pamphlets, and documents from the late colonial and early federal era. He was an intensely disciplined and energetic researcher and by the end of this odyssey he had 5,000 pages ("every one crammed full") of notes that would provide the basis for a great deal of his academic work. Toward the end of a productive career, McDonald thought these notes could still be used to write a dozen monographs beyond what he had already published.

This immersion in the era's documents gave McDonald an especially fine-grained knowledge of the concerns and interests of Americans in the years before and during the Founding. It also set him on a collision course with received wisdom about the Founding prevalent among academic historians of his own time.

This received wisdom was substantially derived from the work of historian Charles Beard, whose most influential book was titled *An Economic Interpretation of*

the Constitution of the United States. In it Beard offered a revisionist take on the Founding, claiming that the Constitution at heart reflected the economic interests of its framers and other leaders of the young republic. A major document of the progressive era, Beard's history was adopted by an upcoming generation in the academy. The essential position of these "New Historians" was to emphasize economic forces as the key determinant of history at the expense of, for instance, the more traditional emphasis on politics, culture, and individuals as the drivers.

As an example of this line of thought, Beard claimed that support and opposition to the Constitution revealed clear class interests. He posited a sharp divide in support between small farmers and debtors on the one hand and people with economic interests as such as shipping, manufacturing, and public securities—capital—on the other. In addition, Beard wrote that the key movers behind the Constitution came from those who were "with a few exceptions, immediately, directly, and personally interested in, and derived economic advantage from, the establishment of the new system."

McDonald, however, found that Beard's thesis, though enticing for progressives, did not square with the facts on the ground. Delegates to the Constitutional convention did not act as a consolidated economic bloc. Nor did supporters and opponents in the state-by-state ratification process follow the assumed Beardian patterns. What's more, there were those who supported the Constitution despite understanding that they ran a financial risk by doing so. These included Robert Morris, who was among the country's richest men and a key financial supporter of the Revolution. But after the ratification of the Constitution, his finances went south and he ended up in a debtors' prison.

The lesson for historians is that theory is no substitute for research and an openness to what that digging reveals. Also, people are complex. Their actions and motivations might well defy our expectations. The best historians are sensitive to the particularities of the people and times they interpret and do not shoehorn those subjects into preconceived patterns.

McDonald followed *We the People* with a number of other books, including *E Pluribus Unum: The Formation of the American Republic* and *Novus Ordo Seclorum:*

The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution. This trio on the Founding still make for an excellent review of the subject.

Beyond these three, McDonald wrote plenty more about the first decades of the nation, including books on the presidencies of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and an excellent biography of Alexander Hamilton. Stretching beyond that period, his *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History* was especially helpful for me in writing *The Language of Liberty*. If you have read my book, you'll know that I like quotations and use them to open every entry in it. And McDonald's book on the presidency gave me one of my favorites:

Though the powers of the office have sometimes been grossly abused, though the presidency has become almost impossible to manage, and though the caliber of the people who have served as chief executive has declined erratically but persistently from the day George Washington left office, the presidency has been responsible for less harm and more good, in the nation and the world, than perhaps any other secular institution in history.

Besides what he contributed to my thinking for *The Language of Liberty*, I owe Forrest McDonald another debt. Reading his Hamilton biography helped crystalize the thinking behind my previous book, *American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land*. At the end of the Hamilton bio, McDonald wrote, if memory serves, that due to Hamilton's labors, the North entered a sustained period of economic dynamism, while the South, having lost its battles with the Secretary of the Treasury, had to nurse its grievances and sustain itself with agrarian myths.

Reading this coda brought some of my own thoughts about America's agrarian traditions into better focus. I had already read lots by Wendell Berry and the Nashville Agrarians by then. Now I was curious about whether those later southern writers fit into a pattern that stretched back to Jefferson and whether that tradition, if it existed, could be contrasted fruitfully with other agrarianisms in America's cultural history. That, for me, was the starting point for *American Georgics* and its most interesting aspect.