

Brian Herbert Medlin BA (Adel); BPhil MA (Oxon)
Professor of Philosophy, Flinders University 1967-1988 (Emeritus 1988)
10/12/1927 to 27/10/2004

*“For I have held,
For half my life, hard to the faith
That a clear mind can do something with
Any known phenomenon,
And everything that can be done
Will be done if only we’re able
To render the world intelligible.”*

A love poem Brian Medlin

Professor Brian Medlin will be remembered by many South Australians for his very public leadership of the campaign to stop the war in Vietnam. For many of us, the enduring image of Brian Medlin is the long-haired professor of philosophy, spread-eagled between two policemen, being dragged from the front of the anti-war march in the September of 1970. Along with many others, Brian Medlin was arrested that day and after a trial widely condemned for its distorted, incoherent and contradictory testimonies, he was imprisoned. He was released three weeks later but during his incarceration, supporters kept a candle-light vigil outside the Adelaide Gaol.

Few of us are ever called upon to go to gaol for our beliefs. However, as public as his own contribution to the anti-war movement was, throughout his life Brian Medlin continued to insist that there were many campaigners who did much more than him. That alone says much about the man.

Brian Medlin was born in 1927 in Orroroo, in the mid-north of South Australia. He grew up in Adelaide, attending Richmond Primary School and Adelaide Technical High School. Notwithstanding his early success at school, it was Medlin’s oft-repeated contention that his education was drawn from the State Library of South Australia and the bush. While at secondary school the Adelaide poet, Flexmore Hudson, introduced young Medlin to the work of Bertrand Russell, thus setting him on his life’s course.

After graduating from Adelaide Tech in the mid 1940s, Medlin took a position as storekeeper on the Victoria River Downs station. Already a prodigious reader, the eighteen-year-old spent his time devouring the books he would get sent up regularly from Mary Martin’s bookshop. Staying on in the Territory after resigning from Victoria River Downs, Medlin was variously kangaroo shooter, stockyard builder, horse-breaker and drover with his own plant. Once, at the request of boss drover Matt Savage, Medlin took a mob of 60 horses across the Tanami to the West Australian coast, accompanied only by Savage’s 12 year-old daughter and her uncle. He was immensely proud of his time and achievements in the Territory: indeed, they marked him for life.

Returning to Adelaide in the early 1950s, Medlin worked as a clerk for Ansett Airways and as a teacher at Adelaide Tech. Meanwhile, he enrolled at Adelaide University to study English, Latin and Philosophy. Here he was taught by, among others, Douglas Muecke, Jack Smart and Charles Martin to whom he always acknowledged an intellectual debt. At this time, Medlin became increasingly active in the cultural and literary life of Adelaide, then emerging as the "Athens of the South". He wrote poetry, the best of which was regarded as strong and arresting and he moved in Adelaide's literary circles which included the likes of John Bray, Mary Martin, Charles Jury, Max Harris, Douglas Muecke and Michael Taylor.

Brian Medlin's intellect and staggering capacity for comprehension were reflected in his academic results. He graduated with first class honours in 1958, having established himself as a brilliant philosopher of great promise. He then went to Oxford, on a Kennedy Research scholarship and with some financial support from his friend, Charles Jury. During his overseas sojourn he taught philosophy for a year in the newly independent Ghana before returning to England in 1961 to take up a Research Fellowship at New College, Oxford.

Brian Medlin was highly regarded at Oxford. It was here he met Iris Murdoch, with whom he corresponded off and on for most of his life. Iris Murdoch visited him in Adelaide.

In 1964 Medlin returned to Australia to take up a research readership at the University of Queensland. In 1967 he was appointed Foundation Professor of Philosophy at the Flinders University of South Australia. By this time, Medlin had published significant articles in several areas of philosophy, including the much anthologized "Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism" and "The Unexpected Examination". In "Ryle and the Mechanical Hypothesis" (1967), Medlin presented important work in which he extended the pioneering Place - Smart "Identity Theory" of sensations as brain processes to a general "Central State Materialism" covering all aspects of the mind. This work was shortly joined by that of David Armstrong in 1968 and David Lewis in 1970 - 2, and the new theory quickly became central to the philosophy of mind.

It was, as I have said earlier, in his academic post at Flinders that Medlin came to wider attention. He brought to his teaching charisma, dramatic flair and rigorous argument. Demanding hard work and utterly scathing of shoddy thinking Brian Medlin was, nonetheless, a sympathetic, generous and amusing teacher. He encouraged us to see philosophy, not merely as an intellectual pursuit but as something integral to our daily lives. He also encouraged us, wherever possible, to engage in philosophy in accessible language. "You ought to be able write a lot of your philosophy in such a way that a bloke can pick up your essay in bar, sit down quietly and with a bit of effort, understand what you're saying."

Australia's participation in the war in Vietnam appalled Medlin. His own experiences in the anti-war campaign and the attacks on him and his fellow campaigners led him to study, in detail and with his customary rigour, the nature of the society that gave rise to wars such as the one in Vietnam.

Committed to democracy in all areas of society, including the workplace, Medlin set up a democratic Staff-Student Consultative Committee, just one of the many progressive developments in the Flinders University philosophy department under his stewardship. In the ensuing years, a number of radical courses were introduced, including the first Women's Studies course in Australia. Professor Medlin himself wrote and taught the highly innovative and influential course, Politics and Art, which gave rise to the Australian folk-rock band, Redgum.

A fit and intensely physical man, Brian Medlin never fully recovered from a serious motorcycle accident in 1983. He retired early, in 1988, after which he was named Emeritus Professor. He settled in the Wimmera with his wife, Christine Vick, where they worked to restore ten run-down acres to covenanted bushland, publishing their findings as they went. Medlin and Vick were awarded an Environmental Hero Award (Wimmera 2004) for their work.

In his later years Brian Medlin maintained his passionately active interest in all things, including history, current affairs, science, natural history and photography. To the time of his death, he continued to write philosophy and exchange correspondence with friends and academics from all over the world.

On hearing of his death, one of my friends remarked that he loved the fact that we had an internationally renowned philosopher who was also a poet, bushman, drover, horse breaker and photographer. "Nowhere else but in Australia," he said.

Brian Medlin is survived by his beloved wife, Christine, his children Barnabus, Margaret, Jake and Bruno and his step-daughters, Alice and Rebecca. He is deeply missed.

John Schumann

John Schumann was a student of Professor Medlin's at Flinders University. The two remained very close friends from that time on.