



Episode 1,463: A Historian Abandons Neoconservatism

Guest: Brion McClanahan

WOODS: I actually had some requests for Brion McClanahan Week, and I had been wanting to do that, and so I thought, okay, the listeners want it, I want to do it, Brion's available, so here we are. I want to start, as I was saying, with an episode similar to one that I've done with a couple other people, where we just talk about you and your background, because people should know Brion McClanahan, first of all. And if they don't, this is their opportunity to get to know you, and if they don't, then apparently they have not subscribed to Liberty Classroom, which is breaking my heart here. Okay, it's breaking my heart. They could go over to LibertyClassroom.com anytime, and they would find a huge amount of material from Brion.

But let's start with your background. You actually were born in Delaware. I think you're the only person I know, other than Joe Biden – was he actually born in Delaware?

MCCLANAHAN: No, no, I was actually born in Northern Virginia, in Fairfax County, Virginia.

WOODS: Oh, wait, wait –

MCCLANAHAN: But I moved to Delaware.

WOODS: Oh, you moved to Delaware. Okay, so you're even worse than Joe Biden in that respect. Okay, all right.

MCCLANAHAN: Well, Biden's from Pennsylvania originally.

WOODS: Really? Okay, so I still don't know anybody from Delaware [laughing]. All right, never mind. So all right, so you grew up there, and somehow came to be the historian you are, where you have kind of an emphasis on the South, but you're not originally from the South. You live in the South now. So tell me about Brion McClanahan growing up. If you were to ask Tom Woods growing up what his political views were, well, he would be slightly embarrassed today to tell you what they were. But I'm curious about, let's say, little Brion McClanahan. When does he first become politically aware, let's say?

MCCLANAHAN: Okay, well, I was born Northern Virginia and then moved to Delaware when I was ten. So I really wasn't that politically astute. I was just like any other kid. I just wanted to have fun and do all the things that kids do. But probably when I got to college as an undergraduate. Now, I remember – and everybody goes through this conversion process. I know you've talked about it. So my father used to listen to Rush Limbaugh all the time when I

got to college, and so I'd come home on breaks and he was listening to Rush Limbaugh. Incidentally, by the way, just a side note, do you realize that you share an important day with Rush Limbaugh? Do you know that?

WOODS: No, what is that? His birthday?

MCCLANAHAN: Yes, your birthday is the anniversary of when he launched his program.

WOODS: I did not know that.

MCCLANAHAN: I turned it on yesterday. I was in the car, and he came on right at the beginning of the show, and he talked about it, and it was your birthday yesterday. So there you go. You and Rush, bosom buddies there [laughing].

WOODS: Thank you for telling me.

MCCLANAHAN: So anyways, so my father would listen to Rush Limbaugh, and I had a roommate in college who was — I mean, he was the most leftist of all. This guy was woke before woke was fashionable. So I mean, he was really lefty. And being someone who really wasn't that, I mean, it's like, okay, yeah, I can see what this guy's doing. But so I started listening to that, and of course, I got into politics because of neoconservatism. I think a lot of it is; it's the gateway into things.

Then I had a professor as an undergraduate at Salisbury University in Salisbury, Maryland, and he was great. I mean, he was conservative. He was a young guy. He was in his 30s, and he liked to play on my softball team. He was really good guy, so it was kind of a friendship, as well as a professor. But he was very conservative and got me interested in the South and the Southern tradition. He's from Baltimore, actually, but his family were Maryland Confederates. And so he was really interested in that, and that got me started. From there, it was going to South Carolina and Clyde Wilson and getting my PhD there. And that was the process.

Now, I first became interested in history when I was about 12. And I think I always had this inclination that there was something to this history thing when it came to politics. And that was when I went to Williamsburg for the first time, and I thought, man, this is great. I really want to do history. But then I realized that you don't make any money being an actor in Williamsburg, so I had to do something else. And that got me interested in teaching, and I had a few pretty good professors at Salisbury. I also had the stark-raving Marxists, as well, in the political science department, so that was a lot of fun.

My junior and senior year, I was very much interested in politics, and I was I was the chairman of the College Republicans in Salisbury, and I had a conference where we invited — it was the first time anybody had ever done this on the campus. We invited David Horowitz to come speak. And so I mean, that shows you where I was at that time. But we thought that this was a big deal. And, of course, it's embarrassing, I know, but everybody starts there, and then you move along. You start reading more, and you start getting involved in things. I think the people that stop at neoconservatism don't really get beyond just Fox News or Rush Limbaugh. And at that time, there was really no Fox News. I mean, it just kind of started, the way it is today. And so I read *The Washington Times* every day. I mean, that's where you go, and then

as you read more, you of course think of things a little differently. And then I was blessed to have some pretty good professors in college.

WOODS: I didn't get to know you until — let's see. DO you remember when we met? Was it like mid 2000s or something?

MCCLANAHAN: We met for the first time at Mises, when I did a talk there on my *PIG to the Founding Fathers*.

WOODS: Yeah, okay, so that would have been —

MCCLANAHAN: That was the first time we met. '09.

WOODS: '09, okay, so ten years. Okay, yeah, so I didn't know you at all at this point, and this transformation, so I'm curious to know, who were the people you were reading then and the sources that eventually led you away from, let's say, Rush Limbaughland?

MCCLANAHAN: Well, when you go to South Carolina and you work with Clyde Wilson, you're going to get a lot of Calhoun and you're going to get — I mean, I started reading primary documents, John Taylor of Caroline. Those are the kind of things that got me interested in this transformation.

WOODS: All right, back up for just a minute, because you studied at the University of South Carolina, you studied with Clyde Wilson. Some people will know who he is. I want you to tell them the significance Clyde Wilson. But did you know about Clyde before you went there? Is that the reason you went?

MCCLANAHAN: Absolutely. My advisor as an undergraduate, Bart Talbert, studied with Forrest McDonald, and so I was either going to go work with Forrest McDonald at Alabama, and I visited it there, or I was going to go to South Carolina with Clyde. And Clyde Wilson is the editor — or was the editor. He's Professor Emeritus now, but he was the editor of the Calhoun Papers at South Carolina.

And so I went to South Carolina first, met with Clyde on a visit, and I actually didn't talk to him for more than about 30 seconds. He told me to go meet with these two graduate students and they would talk to me. So that was hilarious, because they took me into a room and interrogated me, like put the hot light on m, who was this guy coming down here? And that was my interview with Clyde Wilson. They went back and been told Clyde that I'd be okay. So then I drove to Alabama and met with Forrest McDonald. And it was Forrest McDonald and his wife, and Forrest McDonald said very little. His wife was there, and she did all the talking. And he asked me what I wanted to do. *He* asked me that, but then she talked after that. And I told her, told him, and she said, "Well, you need to go work with Clyde."

WOODS: Oh, that's funny.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, so that was it. So then I went to work with the Clyde. But so yes, I knew him, and I knew him because of Bart Talbert. Bart wrote a really good book. He's written one book, and then he decided he was — he played rugby. Bart's an interesting character. He was a national rugby player. He played at James Madison, but he was a really good Division I rugby

player. And he was more interested in athletics, still is really I think, than much else. But he wrote a really good book on Maryland in the Civil War. It's *The South's First Casualty*. And if you go out and look for it, you've got to pay like \$600 or \$700 for this book now, because it's out of print. But he knew Forrest and of course he knew Clyde, and so that was my introduction to both.

And so when I go to work with Clyde, and Clyde has been — gosh, Clyde was doing stuff in *National Review* when it had some people on there that actually were intelligent. Back in the '60s, he was writing for all kinds of people. In fact, some of the best stuff Clyde ever wrote was in the early '70s, on Jefferson and others. But so I go to work with Clyde, and he's assigning all this stuff, Basil Gildersleeve and all this stuff that I'd never heard of before. And so of course, that's getting me interested in these type of decentralization, secession, nullification, all the things that I talk about now, but also the Southern tradition.

So that was my transformation. It was working with Clyde, it was reading more primary material. As an undergraduate, I was very interested in James K. Polk and Andrew Jackson, and I thought James K. Polk was great. And that's embarrassing, but I did. I wrote two papers just lauding James K. Polk, this guy is awesome, greatest president ever. And now looking back on that, I think, gosh, what was I thinking? But it was typical. I mean, you get in, you like this nationalism, you like this centralization. I mean, you're a neoconservative, you still think that way. So wars are good, and what we need is a good war, and Polk got us a good war. We got half of Mexico, isn't that great? So that that was where I was when I went to South Carolina, and of course, it just moved on from there. But it took a little time. I mean, I have sympathy for people that email me and say, "Gosh, I'm just now reading the stuff. I've never heard this before. What direction can you point me in so that I can learn some more? Because I'm just tired of listening to Rush Limbaugh all the time" — or I'm tired of Sean Hannity, or whatever it is. "I've listened to that my whole life. And now I want something else."

WOODS: Did Clyde himself guide you in your own personal views, or was he just there strictly for your academic work?

MCCLANAHAN: Clyde's an interesting character. He doesn't say a whole lot. Of course, as you know, he has a speech issue, so it's hard for him to talk. But even then, even when he talks, he doesn't really say much. I remember I actually told him one time — this is, again, embarrassing. I actually said that what we need is another good war, and his response was, "Well, wars kill indiscriminately. We don't need those." That's all he said.

WOODS: Wow.

MCCLANAHAN: And he would do things like that. For example, we went to his office one time and he said, "Okay, tell me everything you know about George Washington." It was just off the cuff, everything you know. So I was actually with my roommate, who's a professor in Georgia now, and we looked at each other and thought, is this guy serious? He said, "Yeah, I want to everything." So we said a few things, and he said, "You don't know anything. You'd better start reading."

WOODS: Oh.

MCCLANAHAN: [laughing] So that was that. His favorite phrase was, "Read, read, read," because that was Gibbon, when he was writing his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he would say he would scribble, scribble, scribbles. So Clyde's thing was, "Read, read, read." In fact, apparently he called one of his other students one time before I was there, and they were studying for comps, and he called him on the phone and all he said was, "Read, read, read," and he hung up the phone [laughing].

WOODS: Oh, my gosh.

MCCLANAHAN: He's a man of few words, but he says things that are — Or you would go to a conference with Clyde, or we would have an informal discussion, and everybody would say everything, and Clyde would say one thing, and that would be it. He would listen the whole time, he'd say one thing, and that was that, and everybody would just stop talking about it, because he said the final thing, all you can say. So Clyde's position always was a gentle nudging in a direction. He might make a statement that would make you think, and then you'd have to go get something else and read about it.

But anytime — even after I left. When I was writing my *PIG to the Founding Fathers*, I sent that to him, and he read the whole thing, made suggestions, "Don't do this. Don't do this. Do this. This is better." So he's very good about that. He's always been there to help guide what I'm doing now. Now, I don't rely on him as much anymore, but even ten years ago, I was still interested in getting his opinion and ideas on things because, as you know, when you write a book and you get into it and then you think, gosh, I don't know anything about this [laughing]. So it's hard at times, and he was there to always help me along in my career.

WOODS: I can't help saying this, and maybe there'll be some listeners who will be impatient with me for pointing this out, but it just has to be said. There's Clyde, making this brief but extremely humane remark about wars, "Wars kill indiscriminately. We don't need one of those." Okay, just simple, simple observation, but yet I wish our ruling class felt that way. You know, that'd be nice. But yet, meanwhile, you have the so-called objectivists — now, not all objectivists but like the ones who run the objectivist organizations and stuff and who are well-known public speakers — they can say, "I want to reduce the Middle East to rubble. I just want it to be a pile of broken glass when I'm done with it," and they still get invited to mainstream Washington, DC libertarian events, no problem. Students for Liberty will invite them, no problem. That's no problem.

Saying that kind of thing, with that kind of extreme violence is really no problem. I mean, yeah, maybe the organizers, if really, really pressed on it, will say, yeah, that's not really the best approach, but hey, we agree on a lot of other things. But these people would die a thousand deaths before inviting a guy like Clyde Wilson, even though Clyde Wilson knows more than every speaker on their roster put together. I mean, that's why I just can't be part of that part of the movement. And I'm just glad. It's just anti-intellectual and embarrassing and morally grotesque. And why should I want to kiss the asses of these people? I just I don't — why what I want to do that? These are not good people.

MCCLANAHAN: No, and the interesting thing about that, of course, is why Clyde is persona non grata, is because he writes disparaging things about Lincoln, or he writes positive things about John C. Calhoun, things that would have been just — okay, but these are intellectual disputes, but we can we can agree on other things. And so that all went back to the Reagan years. I mean, back to the '80s when Bradford was denied by Bill Bennett, essentially, a

position the Reagan administration. So all the people that were in line with Bradford were purged, and the Heritage Foundation became Neoconservative, Inc., and they pump out all these "intellectuals" who agree with, like you said, just bomb away. We're just going to bomb Iran. We're going to bomb Syria. We're going to bomb everywhere. And who cares about the welfare state as long as we control it? We'll just make it softer and kinder and gentler on the taxpayer. But this is where we are, and you're right. I mean, that the real intellectuals, many of them are denied access because of the fact that they say unpopular things. And it's sad.

WOODS: So now we've got Brion, whose fertile mind is gradually being changed in a variety of things. Now for me, it was a combination of *Chronicles* magazine, which most of my listeners won't even know about, and Rothbard. Who was it for you?

MCCLANAHAN: Gosh, well, I didn't start reading *Chronicles* until I was a little bit older, but of course Clyde was writing there all the time, so I did read it once I got to South Carolina. I would say for me it was more of the primary – for you, it was someone like Rothbard. For me, it was reading Taylor. It was reading Nathaniel Macon. I was reading people like that and getting into – of course, also at that time, I was more interested in the 1850s and '60s, and so doing research on people like James Bayard of Delaware. It was getting more into the primary material than it was for modern political thinkers that got me interested in politics. I know it's weird to say, but I really – and Forrest McDonald actually said this too. Did you know that Forrest McDonald, he read the secondary material, but he had his wife read it all first and then tell him which books to read?

WOODS: No.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, he would get her to tell him the top books that he had to know, because he wanted to do the primary material. He wanted to get into the sources. And I mean, if you read his stuff, I mean, it's amazing, because he really doesn't care about the secondary literature too much. Of course, he had his first home run taking down Charles Beard, but it was more in line with, this is what the primary material says, and this is what the old Republicans say, this is what the Secessionists say. And these are the things that I like to read, and so I think that's really where it was. Tom Fleming, who's of course at *Chronicles*, he was interesting to me. Of course, Clyde. But I never – Murray Rothbard is great, but those weren't the kind of people that got me interested in politics. It was more the primary material.

WOODS: Okay, but I am going to push a little bit harder here, because I don't think the primary material alone changes your mind on foreign policy necessarily. So what was it that made you think – because I mean, when I was growing up, I thought it was exciting to cheer on the US wars, because it was like a video game on my TV, with clear good guys and bad guys, and that's kind of fun.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah.

WOODS: And I mean, I think a lot of kids were like that. It takes some kind of a push to get you out of that.

MCCLANAHAN: Well, I think you can look at history – I mean, if you look at the war – which if you're in the South, there's only one war, right? So that was a tragic episode, and I think

looking at that from a different perspective, from a defeated perspective, which when you start studying Southern history, that's what you're going to get. It's all defeat. And that was so powerful to me, that these people suffered under that for four years, the population, civilian population, the deprivations they had to go through. And I think that was more than anything else my point where I said, You know, I don't know if — I had a friend as an undergraduate who loved Sherman. He thought Sherman was great, because he'd just punish everybody and slaughter people. And I thought, oh, that's cool, back when I was an graduate. That's fun. That's exciting. But you go and you study in the South enough, and you study from that perspective, you read the burning of Columbia, South Carolina with the Simms, and you read that stuff, and then you think, my gosh, this was horrible. It's tragic. And so that was where I really started looking at war.

And then I can't really identify one particular individual that was just so transformational, where I said, okay, this person is going to drive me in the direction of being antiwar. I think it was just reading from that Southern position, looking at wars differently. And so I really don't know what to tell you as far as an individual besides that, that would be so important in an antiwar transformation. As I've gotten older and as the proliferation of these things has become more prominent online and other journal, I mean, it's been easier. But I think that's really where my point started, with just looking at that war in the 1860s and thinking this was just a tragic episode, and it's not worth it. The American War for Independence, my gosh, watching *Saving Private Ryan*, I remember watching that thinking this is really a cool movie. I can barely even watch a war movie now without getting choked up. It's kind of sad, but I think to myself, my gosh, this is just so tragic. It's hard for me to watch. The lives are just snuffed out. It's terrible.

WOODS: You've written a couple of books on the Founders, and I'm curious to know — well, first of all, can you distinguish between the Founders and the Framers?

MCCLANAHAN: Certainly. I actually call them the Founding Generation?

WOODS: That's good.

MCCLANAHAN: I think that is the better way to look at that it.

WOODS: That is good, yeah.

MCCLANAHAN: Because you have the Founders — I mean, in the *PIG to the Founding Fathers*, I identified the big six. When you say "the Founders," essentially what you're talking about there are Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Franklin, Adams. I mean, that's what people think. Those are the big six. But you have to move beyond that. There are so many other people. But the Founding Generation would have been — it's generational. This is cross-generational. You've got everybody that was there framing the Constitution. You've got the ratifiers. You've got people that weren't involved in either, which would be someone like Jefferson. So that's a comprehensive way to look at the generation. And of course, there are a lot of differences, but I think fundamentally, you can find a lot of similarities. And that's what also drew me to that group too. I call them the greatest generation in American history. The World War II generation doesn't hold a candle, because of what these guys were able to do. And it's amazing. It's remarkable, really. And so I also moved from studying the 1850s and 60s back to the founding period, because I found that to be a little more attractive overall, and I

got interested in the in the American War for Independence and some of the battles and things there, too. So that was also a transformation that I went through.

WOODS: One last thing for this first of our episodes together. In the Founding Generation, who would you say, if you had to pick just one just for the sake of time, one person who's lesser known in that founding generation, but who's really good?

MCCLANAHAN: Nathaniel Macon, easy. Nathaniel Macon from North Carolina is one of my favorites. This is a man that lived — his plantation was called Buck Spring, and he would check his mail once a month. Once a month. I mean, can you imagine that?

WOODS: Impossible.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, once a month. That's all he'd do. We'll go out there once a month; he had everything he needed on his plantation. When he died, he actually paid the undertaker — because he knew he was going to die, he paid the guy before he died, so he made sure there was no expense left behind. He voted against a statue for George Washington, because it would cost about 100,000 current dollars. Said it was too expensive. I mean, this is amazing. But he was a great individual on original intent. When there was discussion about nullification, he didn't agree with nullification, but his comment is funny. He said, well, that's stupid. And I'm paraphrasing. He said nullification is essentially stupid. You should just secede. If you don't like it, just leave. Why even go through the process of nullifying? Just get out of the Union. So Nathaniel Macon, of course, he was a war hero, served in the war, American War for Independence, so he had that military career. He was just a very interesting man.

And when he died, he was buried under a whole bunch of rocks, and about 30 years ago, the state of North Carolina had let all that get into disrepair, and a colleague of mine was going out there to visit it with a state legislator, and he saw this thing and he got very upset, and he called the Department of Transportation and said, "Look, if y'all want one more dollar, you've got to come out here and clean this up." And in a day it was done. They went out there taking out all the trees, all the weeds. It was all cleaned up. But no, he is just an interesting character. If you don't know anything about Macon, you should go out and read about him, because he's really one of the best in the Founding Generation.

WOODS: All right, now suppose we want to find out more about Brion McClanahan. We want to follow him. Tell people where they should go.

MCCLANAHAN: Right, you can go to BrionMcClanahan.com. That's BrionMcClanahan.com. You can follow my podcast there. You've got my McClanahan Academy, which, if your listeners want, they can get a discount to that. Use coupon code WOODS. It's always free to sign up there At McClanahan Academy. You get a free course, And then of course, you can purchase some classes if you want to. Look, you can also go to Liberty Classroom, so go out there. I teach there with you. And I'll plug it again. It's more bang for the buck than anything on the web. It's great, as far as education. So lots of ways to find me, but BrionMcClanahan.com is a great place to start.

WOODS: Okay, and of course you mentioned the podcast. You'll want to check out *The Brion McClanahan Show*. All right, thanks, Brion. Episode number two with you coming up tomorrow.