Robert McElvaine was born in 1947 in New Jersey. He attended Rutgers University where he earned a bachelor's degree. He earned a master's degree and his Ph.D. at State University of New York at Binghamton. McElvaine is Elizabeth Chisholm Professor of Arts and Letters and Chair of the Department of History at Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi.

McElvaine frequently has articles published in the major newspapers and magazines including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, and Newsweek. He has appeared as a guest on many television and radio programs including ABC World News, NBC Nightly News, and others.

Women's History Week 2010: Different Spheres: Reality or Illusion?: Tuesday, March 2.

Dr. Robert S. McElvaine, keynote speaker for San Antonio College Women's History Week 2010, is the author of “Eve’s Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History,” a work which combines the fields of biology, history, language, psychology, anthropology, and religion to present a cogent and challenging alternative interpretation to what is too commonly assumed to be the “natural order of things.”

Dr. McElvaine’s lecture, based in part on this work, will present an innovative and multidisciplinary challenge to traditional interpretations about the relative status of women and men in society and the ways in which perceptions and misperceptions of differences between the sexes have shaped human history, beginning in prehistory.

Robert S. McElvaine.

Eve’s Seed: Biology, the Sexes and the Course of History.

“Eve’s Seed is a bestseller waiting to be discovered: a package of sex, science and species’ vanity nicely wrapped in sparkling prose.” – LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW.

“This impressive book . . . will provide [an] invaluable source of inspiration . . . regarding the huge issue of male/female roles and their impact on us. It’s about time someone put men in their proper place: on the bottom.” – George Carlin.

In this book, Robert McElvaine introduces the new field of “biohistory” and presents a major reinterpretation of the human experience. This "provocative study" is history on the grandest scale. It "re-synthesizes the full sweep of human history around the concept of sexual difference."

McElvaine utilizes biology, anthropology, psychology, religious studies, women's studies, and popular culture, in addition to more traditional history, in weaving his reinterpretation of the course of human history from evolution to the present. He builds upon and extends the work of such thinkers as Karen Horney, Margaret Mead, Ashley Montagu, and Gerda Lerner.

Eve's Seed has been hailed by several major thinkers as a revolutionary work of major importance in how we understand human development, history, religion, and the sexes. William H. McNeill, the founding father of the concept of world history, calls Eve's Seed "a powerful, learned and provocative work" that "is a radical revision of traditional visions of human history."

In a rare case of agreement, feminist pioneer Betty Friedan and Harvard sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson both see Eve's Seed as a ground-breaking work that will change the way we see the human condition. "Eve's Seed signals a significant paradigm shift," Friedan wrote, and Wilson said, "a new field is stirring to life" with the book.

In a starred review, Publishers Weekly said that McElvaine's "challenging overview" is "daring": "Written with passion, wit and insight, this accessible book throws down the gauntlet to academics and nonspecialists alike, daring a radical rethinking of the basic 'truths' on which cultures have been constructed."

McElvaine argues that because women can do certain things that men cannot—carry and give birth to offspring and nourish them from their bodies—many men have experienced to varying degrees what psychoanalyst Karen Horney termed "womb envy." Such insecure men have long attempted to define manhood in terms of complete opposition to womanhood. A "real man" has been seen in most cultures as "hateawoman." To counterbalance the biological "no-man's lands" of pregnancy, birthing, and nursing, men create artificial "no-woman's lands." To compensate for what men cannot do, they tell women they may not do other things. Which areas women are excluded from vary from culture to culture, McElvaine writes, but they have usually included the clergy, politics, the military, and most of the business world.

Among McElvaine's contentions are that the invention of agriculture—which he believes was almost certainly accomplished by women, who were responsible for the provision of plant food in hunter-gatherer societies—disrupted the long-standing roles of the sexes and, over a period of time, devalued the traditional male roles, especially hunting. McElvaine begins the book by saying that if he had to sum up human history in a single sentence, it would be: "Hell hath no fury like a man devalued."

Ultimately, the McElvaine Thesis maintains, agriculture provided men with a metaphor—seeds planted in the furrowed soil seemingly being analogous to men "planting" semen in the furrowed anatomy of a woman—that enabled them to claim that males are the sex with creative power: the authors of new life who therefore have authority over women. It necessarily followed that the Ultimate Creative Power, God, must also be male. This prehistoric mistake has, McElvaine says, enormously influenced all of history.
Among the key points in the McElvaine Thesis are:

- Because men cannot compete with women’s capabilities in the crucial realms of reproduction and nourishing offspring, McElvaine argues, men generally seek to avoid a single standard of human behavior and achievement. They create separate definitions of “maleness” which are based on a false opposition to “womanliness.” A “real man” has been seen in most cultures as “notawoman.”

- Although this viewpoint actually begins with “woman” as the “standard” human and proceeds to define “man” by its supposed vast differences from that standard, people do not like to see themselves in negative terms, so men have generally sought ways to transform woman into a negative, thus making man positive.

- Human life—and the situation of both sexes—was radically changed about 10,000 years ago by the invention of agriculture, which in all likelihood was accomplished by women.

- In one of his most striking contentions, McElvaine says that the story of Adam and Eve in the third chapter of Book of Genesis is an allegory for the invention of agriculture by women (Eve’s eating from the Tree of Knowledge) and its long-term consequences (the loss of what seemed in distant retrospect to have been a pre-agricultural paradise in which people lived easily, without work, simply picking fruit from trees, and men having to go forth and till the soil to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow).

- McElvaine says that the development of methods for the intentional production of food (animal herding as well as agriculture) substantially devalued what men had traditionally done. Hunting was no longer needed and defense against other species declined in importance.

- At this point, McElvaine argues, there arose an almost irresistible metaphor, the very widespread acceptance of which has misshaped human life through all of recorded history. The apparent analogy of a seed being planted in furrowed soil to a male’s “planting” of semen in the vulva of a female led to the conclusion that men provide the seed of new life and women constitute the soil in which that seed grows. This Seed Metaphor, which McElvaine calls "the Conception Misconception," has remained with us throughout history and it continues to mislead us in profound ways down to the present.

- The belief that men have procreative power led inevitably to the conclusion that the supreme Creative Power must also be male. The toxic fruit that grew from the Seed Metaphor, McElvaine says, was male monotheism.

- The combination of the belief that God (or the god who is the ultimate creator) is male with the notion that humans are created in God’s image yielded the inescapable conclusion that men are closer than women to godly perfection. Thus the line from the misconceptions about conception emanating from the seed metaphor to the belief, given its classic expressions by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Freud, that women are deformed or “incomplete” men is clear and direct.

- The total subordination of women throughout recorded history, McElvaine argues, is but the first part of the devastating legacy of the Neolithic backlash and the Seed Metaphor. Equally important has been the concomitant suppression in men of all values, ideas, and characteristics associated with women and so defined as inferior. The rest, he says, is history—pretty much all of it—and, the gains of women in recent decades notwithstanding, these legacies from mistaken ideas in the Neolithic Age continue to have enormous effects on us today.

A Big Mississippi Thank Y’all.

Greetings, Californians, from the grateful people of Mississippi. Your state has never been more popular in Mississippi than it has become in the last week.

Some years ago, the Golden State displaced New York as the state many white, traditionalist Mississippians most loved to hate. Once, when my wife told a self-proclaimed Christian here in Jackson that we would be spending the summer in California, the woman’s disgusted response was: “It’s a hellhole, you know.”

Why, then, a sudden surge in popularity among the magnolias for California? Simple. We’re thankful for the lunacy of California politics.

Actually, the gratitude can probably be traced back to several years ago when, largely as a result of the adoption of Proposition 13 in 1978, California fell behind even Mississippi in some education ratings. Now, though, there is even more reason for Mississippians to thank California’s voters.

Mississippi holds its statewide elections in the off-years preceding presidential election years. Being virtually the only political game in town usually results in Mississippi elections receiving a good deal of scrutiny—and often more than a little ridicule.

Our Mississippi politicians have provided the nation with amusement for decades. In 1959 Ross Barnett, when running for governor, was asked what he would do about Quemoy and Matsu, two islands near the coast of China that were then much in the news. The candidate pondered for a moment and said, “I think we could find a position for them on the Fish and Game Commission.” While governor, Barnett opened a speech at the dedication of a new synagogue in Jackson with these words: “My fellow Christians.”

The Barnett stories are legion, as are those about many other Mississippi politicians, from Theodore Bilbo to Kirk Fordice. But, given space limitations, let us turn to just one other example. Cliff Finch, elected in 1975, carried a lunch pail around to show his solidarity with the working man, trashed the governor’s mansion in fights with his wife and then tried to run for president by driving an 18-wheeler to Washington and being photographed in a heart-shaped bathtub.

No one is likely to make fun of any Mississippi candidates this year. We just can’t compete with y’all in California.
Elvis may be alive and well somewhere, but he isn’t running for governor of Mississippi. Ike Turner has not thrown his hat into the ring. Nor has B.B. King, Faith Hill, LeAnn Rimes or Little Milton. Morgan Freeman isn’t a candidate. Neither is Sela Ward, Jerry Rice or Nevada Barr. John Grisham, a man with experience in the state Legislature, is not a candidate. Oprah Winfrey will not seek the governorship of her home state.

We have no pornography publishers running, no strippers, no child TV stars, no robots. All of our candidates are known by two names, which they usually use on annual checks to actually pay their taxes. So far, neither of our nominees for lieutenant governor, Barbara Blackmon and Amy Tuck, has appeared on billboards wearing a pink bikini. There is always a possibility that Republican gubernatorial candidate Haley Barbour will decide to campaign in a pink bikini, but it seems unlikely unless he falls behind in the polls. It’s also unlikely that many of his advisors will be billionaires.

OK, I have to admit that we do have a folksinger on the gubernatorial ballot. Sherman Lee Dillon is the Green Party nominee. But he’ll probably receive a smaller percentage of the vote here than Larry Flynt will get in California.

So Californians, as a former president -- the one from those halcyon days when the budgets of California, Mississippi and the United States were balanced -- liked to say: “We feel your pain.” But you’ll forgive us for being glad that, for once, it’s not ours.

Robert S. McElvaine.

“As Marx turned Hegel upside down, so McElvaine overturns Aristotle, Marx, Freud, and even Darwin in showing us how biological and cultural evolution need no longer see men and women as opposites or unequal. Eve’s Seed is a revelation, engagingly and imaginatively written.”  – Carl Degler, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian.

The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941.

“Frederick Lewis Allen’s Since Yesterday (1940) caught the popular elements of that grim era, but though charming, was superficial. McElvaine is thorough as well as entertaining. . . . Along with cultural aspects, which McElvaine handles superbly, he astutely reports the political unrest.”  – CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER.

Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the “Forgotten Man”

“There’s nothing more deeply moving than reading the words and thus hearing the voices of the actual survivors of hard times. McElvaine has captured these voices as no one else ever has.”  – Studs Terkel.