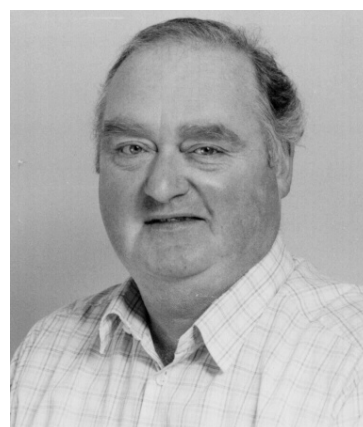


The Day the World Fell Down and a Butterfly Flapped its Wings

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One attraction of economic history is that its practitioners are not afraid to think about the long run and, contrary to Keynes's famous dictum, death may not be the only outcome; much may be learned en route about the enduring and fundamental processes of socio-economic change. Unlike economists however, historians are not generally required to project their thoughts into the future. On this occasion there is a compelling reason for doing so. Assuming that the Economic History Society, and the subject which it represents, survive for another 75 years what aspects of the discipline's past are likely to be of interest to our heirs and successors when they celebrate the Society's sesquicentennial in 2076? When the Society comes to commission the obligatory, commemorative essay what will the unfortunate recipient of the task find useful by way of sources? Will it be our publications, abundant or meagre as these may be? Possibly, but historical writing becomes dated with remarkable rapidity as interests re-focus and methods of discourse change. Will it be the content and methods of teaching? Again, possibly, but if we are to believe the predictions of the technologically foresighted, by then most students, regardless of subject, will be engaged in distance learning and able to download material prepared by a handful of the world's best teachers. Our current syllabi and methods may seem so obsolete and distant as to be of antiquarian interest only.



On the even more improbable assumption that the past is still considered a fit subject for investigation in 75 years time what might interest our future historian are the methods of recruitment of economic historians in the new, that is, post-Robbins universities. What follows is a memoire, a fragmentary recollection, of one newly appointed assistant-lecturer in Economic and Social History at the University of York. Like much historical evidence it is entirely subjective, unrepresentative of anything other than a particular time and set of circumstances.

Despite repeated petitions from York's leading citizens – the first in 1617 – that the city merited a university, it was not until 1960 that the government gave its approval in principle. In April 1960 York – and East Anglia – were officially designated. York received its Charter in October 1963. With expansion in higher education East Anglia and York were both advertising in 1969 for new staff in economic history. Searching with some urgency would be a more apt description, for there was considered to be a shortage of suitably qualified applicants. Contemporary quantitative evidence makes this shortage something of a puzzle, at least as far as the further particulars for two assistant lecturers at York were concerned, for these stated that 'there will be approximately 40 students enrolled in the Department of Economics in 1969/70... (and) ... it is expected that the Department will have a staff of 22'. Just in case this

staff-student ratio appeared less than generous, it was pointed out that extra specialist help was forthcoming from the Institute of Social and Economic Research and, for tutorials, from suitably qualified Junior Research Fellows and graduates. One piece of the puzzle may be resolved by the fact that both Economics and Economic & Social History were taught under the rubric of the B.A. in Social Sciences and thus read during the four terms of Part One by intending specialists in Politics and Sociology. York also had a high proportion of graduates: of the 600 students enrolled in Social Sciences 'approximately 100 will be graduate students'. Staff-student ratios were generous, though less so than a narrow departmental perspective suggested. The rest of the explanation could be found in the prospectus which included, under the names of the existing staff in each department, the number of additional appointments still to be made. In a world where university funding was determined five years in advance and where public expenditure on higher education was under-written by continuous economic growth – notwithstanding the increasing realisation of better performing economics – perpetual expansion was an underlying assumption.

The staff shortage meant that it was not unusual to obtain an appointment without a doctorate and certainly without a long list of publications. Moreover, full employment gave the newly qualified graduate a wide range of choice in the job market. At this point frankness is in order. In 1969 I was a post-graduate in Edinburgh University and had not completed my doctorate nor decided to be an academic. On one of several trips to London, where multiple job applications made a nice vacation 'earner' by the simple expedient of arranging half a dozen interviews and recouping expenses from each potential employer, a common practice amongst 1960s Scottish graduates, I had made a provisional commitment to join the Bank of London and South America. This was after a mildly unusual interview which consisted of three opening questions: 'Did I play golf?', 'Did I play tennis?' and 'Did I intend to get married in the next six months?' to which the answers were 'not any more', 'yes', and 'possibly but unlikely' – in that order. These were followed by a fascinating discussion of the pleasures of home grown tobacco, a crop both the interviewer and I grew and of which I possessed more knowledge than the monetary economics that I had taken the trouble to revise for the interview. Like much else in British industry, selection processes were quite relaxed and certainly less rigorous than in the universities, though these, as we shall see, were far from demanding.

It was not then lack of economic opportunity which guided me towards the groves of academe. Economic necessity did, however, play a contributory role coupled with a curiosity about economic history. I had been an undergraduate at Edinburgh from 1963 to 1967 in what began as the Department of Political Economy but was mysteriously re-branded as the Department of Economic Science without, it has to be said, making any obvious difference to the product. In the long tradition of Scottish universities, all students embarked on a three-year ordinary degree during which they were required to read a number of 'outside' subjects, amongst which was Economic History. Admission to the four year honours degree required an average mark of sixty per cent in the second year and opened up the opportunity of reading additional courses in Economic History. In the absence of external assessment, no

league tables are available for the 1960s but there can be little doubt that the Economic History department at Edinburgh was then amongst the strongest, if not the strongest, in the UK. The attractions of Economics, whilst never wholly extinguished, were swiftly overshadowed by a series of superb courses and brilliant lecturers: Alan Milward and Berrick Saul with their veritable Cook's tour of modern industrialisation which embraced France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, Denmark, Japan, and North America; Michael Finn on the industrial revolution; Chris Smout on Scotland since the Union – an Englishman who taught Scots how to re-interpret their own history – and Bill Fletcher, fresh from re-interpreting agriculture during the Great Depression. It was not just that these courses were well taught, it was that, by comparison with Economics, they dealt with topics which had a wider relevance than the nations whose histories were covered: the relationship between population and economic growth, the roles of capital formation and the state, the contribution of social values and institutions. Economic History seemed to possess a wider relevance, intellectual vitality, and application that Economics lacked. This strikes me now as an odd state of affairs. Was it a question of personnel or of curriculum? The former seems unlikely for there were good lecturers amongst the Economics staff, though one tutor declined to take Keynesian economics seriously on the grounds that it was 'a passing fashion' – an accurate prediction as it turned out – but less than helpful for those who needed to know sufficient to get through the exam. The latter is the more likely suspect: is there a tutor anywhere who can make indifference curves exciting? It was not just the excessive doses of 'technique' but the lack of 'big questions'. By contrast, Economic History abounded with these. Moreover, lecturers were not afraid to admit that certain questions, in the current state of knowledge, were unanswered, whilst at the same time whetting the appetite by indicating that there was abundant scope for future research. There was, in other words, an optimism, an openness of enquiry, a missionary zeal, a confidence about Economic History that was missing in Economics.

Two years full-time research on the Scotch whisky industry followed, an extraordinarily enjoyable experience. This was funded by a postgraduate award from the Scottish Education Department which came with no strings attached and provided sufficient expenses to allow for prolonged visits to the archives of malt distillers, the whisky industry's trade associations, the Distillers Company and its subsidiaries, the Public Record Office, and the Customs & Excise library. There was a generosity in Britain to youth and their higher education now sadly lost. There were no obligatory graduate 'training courses', though postgraduates were encouraged to take optional courses. One of these, which ran for two years, was econometrics. I enrolled for this following an assurance from the newly arrived Professor of Economics, J.N. Wolfe, that without econometrics my future would be 'as bleak as the handloom weaver'. At least the handloom weaver never had to master matrices or to plough through Johnston's *Introductory Econometrics*. What there was in abundance was the constant encouragement, enthusiasm, and assistance of one's supervisors. In retrospect, it was an incredibly liberal system, a freedom to pursue and fashion a topic that subsequent interventionist funding agencies have eroded.

Having uncovered far more archival material than had been anticipated, little of the thesis had been written by the end of two years and so, in February 1969, advertisements by East Anglia and York for assistant lecturers were particularly attractive; they would provide a livelihood while 'writing-up'. The first interview was at Norwich with splendid overnight accommodation in the Royal Norfolk Hotel but favourable impressions dipped slightly the next morning when I asked an elderly woman if I was at the right bus stop for the university and was told: 'Oh, no, you bain got the right one. You want the bus for Cambridge – over there'. If that was the impact that U.E.A had made on the local citizens, what sort of institution was it? The interview was rigorous and concluded with a full toss from Roy Campbell: 'Are you going to calculate in your thesis the enormous social costs of excessive alcohol consumption?' Answer: 'No, but another graduate at Edinburgh is writing a history of the Scottish temperance movement'. Pause. Silence. Broken by long 'H'mmm' from Roy Campbell. The candidate emerged from the interview feeling that all had not gone as planned.

In fact East Anglia offered a two year appointment. The offer arrived at the same time as an invitation to attend an interview for York on 13 February 1969. With the charming tight-fistedness that pervades Yorkshire the letter stated: 'As it will be necessary for you to spend one night in York, the University will refund up to 35/- of your accommodation expenses and you may take a taxi out to Heslington. I enclose a leaflet listing the local hotels.' Not knowing York, I chose a city centre hotel. On arrival, a heavy snowfall covered the city and the temperature was well below freezing. Ushered to the bedroom by mine host, I was advised that, should the room feel cold, heating was available by means of a coin-operated one-bar electric fire; first impressions of York dipped even lower than East Anglia. The weather was no better and 'hotel' no warmer in the morning. Slipping and sliding down to the bus stop, I caught the number 19 for Heslington for 9.30 interview. A local, the only other passenger, on hearing me ask for Heslington asks if I'm going to the university. In contrast to Norwich, she not only knows where the University is but seems to know everyone in it and maintains a non-stop conversation all the way to Heslington whilst I try to anticipate the questions at interview.

At Heslington Hall there is a friendly welcome from one of the many decorous secretaries who grace the upper floor. A warm smell of fresh coffee pervades the building. At 9.30 precisely the Registrar appears, ushers me into the Vice-Chancellor's office, and introduces Lord James, Alan Peacock, Eric Sigsworth, and Ed Cooney. It is difficult not to be impressed by the presence of the Vice-Chancellor at interviews for the most junior staff. Introductions are followed by a few relaxing questions about the current state of economics at Edinburgh from Alan Peacock, then a long exchange with Ed Cooney about the Distillers Company (in which I learn more about industrial organisation than I ever explain), and next some questions from Eric Sigsworth about the courses I would be interested in developing. Finally, Alan Peacock says that he is surprised to see that I have taken graduate courses in econometrics – this is unusual for an economic historian – why did I do it? Forgetting about the fate of the handloom weaver, I mumble 'Masochism'. Peacock, Sigsworth, Cooney, and the Registrar find this much to their amusement but Lord James has

obviously not heard for he bellows, 'What did the man say!' 'Masochism', I repeat, louder this time, and Lord James joins in the merriment.

That was it, the selection process. No-mini-lectures, no presentations of profound research findings to potential colleagues with the departmental teaching zealot indicating by body language that the candidate should *never* be let near students. No personnel officer to ensure that the candidate understands his contractual obligations to the university. Just a group of friendly, experienced scholars who seemed genuinely interested in your work and what you might offer the university.

Had I said the right thing? Apparently so, for a week later when I am in Elgin working on the records of Scottish Malt Distillers the company secretary comes in. He looks a bit embarrassed and apologises for opening a letter addressed to me. It offers a lectureship, commencing on 1 October 1969 at a salary £1,355, rather than the advertised salary of £1,105. Masochism clearly pays. Other offers from East Anglia and the Bank of London and South America can now be declined. In October I joined the Department of Economics. Eric Sigsworth introduces the other economic historians; the first is Tony Harrison who greets me with 'Oh God, not another bloody Scot. Welcome to York'.

From:

Pat Hudson, editor, *Living Economic and Social History*. Glasgow: Economic History Society, 2001.