



AUSTIN ROBINSON

*Ramsey & Muspratt*

## Edward Austin Gossage Robinson 1897–1993

### I

AUSTIN ROBINSON was born on 20 November 1897 at Toft in Cambridgeshire, the eldest child of ‘an impecunious clergyman’, Albert Robinson, who read mathematics as a scholar of Christ’s College, Cambridge and became a wrangler. He was ordained at the age of twenty-four, and spent the next eight years as a curate. Austin’s mother, Edith Sidebotham, was the daughter of a clergyman who was the vicar at Bourne near Farnham in Surrey for thirty-three years. As Alec Cairncross (1993: 4) has told us, it was a very happy marriage. The Robinsons had four children: three boys and a girl. The children had a happy childhood, even though their father was a remote and distant figure so that their mother did the lioness’s share of their upbringing. The upbringing itself fostered self-reliance, fun and games as well as providing an introduction to a sense of duty and the practical application of Christian principles.

Scholarships were necessary for Austin’s education and he duly obtained them, first to Marlborough and then to Christ’s (he came top of the St John’s/Christ’s group of Cambridge Colleges). Classics was Austin’s subject. He was ‘rigorously drilled’ in its grammar by an eccentric schoolmaster, A. C. B. Brown. This allowed him to jump all the necessary hurdles but it dimmed his enthusiasm, so that his heart was never completely captured. It did ensure that Austin wrote in a distinctively agreeable style in his books, articles, reviews, and letters—he was

a prolific writer of letters which were noted for their lucid elegance as well as for their substance.

Austin obtained his scholarship to Christ's in late 1916. Before taking it up, he joined the Royal Naval Air Service to train as a test pilot of seaplanes, an occupation which he loved. His 'most military' activity was to chase but never catch a Zeppelin (Cairncross 1993:11). The war itself was a deeply significant and traumatic event in his life. In his autobiographical essay (Austin Robinson 1992: 204) he wrote: 'In the modern world, deeply concerned with the dreadful threat of a nuclear war, it is too often forgotten how terrible was the mortality of that pre-nuclear conflict. Of the twenty senior boys in the "house" into which I had gone . . . in 1912, thirteen were dead before I got to Cambridge in the summer of 1919'. He came up to Cambridge 'a very different person'. Though never a pacifist in 'the technical sense', like hundreds of others who had seen war at first hand, 'almost all of [his] generation of Cambridge undergraduates', he was determined to try to make a world in which war was never again used to settle its problems. 'Naive we may have been, but we were nonetheless sincere' (Austin Robinson 1992: 204).

Austin spent his first fifteen months at Cambridge reading classics—his college 'was unsympathetic to [his] view that [he] should use a classical scholarship to be taught the more professional aspects of designing aeroplanes' (Austin Robinson 1992: 204). He duly obtained a First. He then went with relief to economics. A major influence on this decision was hearing Maynard Keynes give a lecture in the course of lectures which became *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919). C. R. Fay, who then taught economics at Christ's, persuaded the college to allow Austin to make the switch and he lent Austin the Marshalls' *Economics of Industry* and Tawney's *Acquisitive Society* to start him off. Austin read them, Taussig's *Principles* and Marshall's *Principles* during the day in the summer of 1921, while working each evening as 'poor-man's lawyer' in the dockyards of Liverpool, getting 'a remarkable education regarding the life and problems of the poor' (Austin Robinson 1992: 205). Austin found Fay an enthusiastic supervisor who was sublimely uncomprehending of the economic theory to be found in Marshall (much as Fay worshipped Marshall himself). This led to furious arguments in supervisions, forcing Austin to make explicit and coherent theoretical arguments in order to drive out misunderstandings and incoherence. When Fay left Christ's for Canada, Austin went to Dennis Robertson and Gerald Shove. Though he felt he

was well instructed by powerful minds, his supervisions never again had the same magic.<sup>1</sup>

Austin graduated with a First in 1922 (the same year as Maurice Dobb who also obtained a First). He began to research in economics at Corpus Christi, which was then renowned for its unique brand of High Church, high Toryism. Having to argue with intelligent colleagues who took very different views on economic and social matters was of inestimable value to Austin, especially after he became a Fellow in 1923 and had to teach as well as to argue and understand. To understand for Austin was to act, he was always a 'hands on' political economist. By 1925 he had moved from lecturing on Money, Credit and Prices, with which he was never happy, to what was and remained his favourite subject, Industry (Cairncross 1993: 17–18).

## II

In 1922 Joan Maurice came up to Girton to read economics, having read history at St Paul's Girls School. She 'graduated' in 1925; she and Austin, whose pupil she had been, married in 1926 (thus releasing Austin from being the one unmarried Fellow resident in Corpus Christi).<sup>2</sup> Soon after they married, the Robinsons went to India where Austin was to tutor the young Maharajah of Gwalior, then aged about ten. Cairncross tells a graphic tale of Austin's experiences there, how he combined an increasing knowledge of British India and the Princely States with involvement in the complex intrigues of the court, and especially in clashes with the strong-willed and all but impossible mother of his pupil. As far as Austin's future career was concerned, not only did the visit in a general way kindle his love for the sub-continent and its peoples but it also introduced him to the problems of economic development in a very practical way. He contributed a first-class piece of applied political economy to *The British Crown and the Indian States* (1928). He drew on inadequate statistics and showed judgement and imagination in estimating fiscal flows to and from the Princely States to British India.

<sup>1</sup> Shove, who later became renowned as a teacher (see Kahn 1987), was shy and ill at ease with returned servicemen because he felt they despised people who had been conscientious objectors during the war. Austin and Shove became firm friends as colleagues in the 1930s.

<sup>2</sup> The Maurices were a formidable and numerous clan whom Austin found 'a trifle frightening' (Cairncross 1993: 19).

The Robinsons were in India for nearly two years.<sup>3</sup> Austin returned to Cambridge to start afresh his long academic career there; it was only seriously interrupted by his distinguished service in Whitehall during the Second World War. He became a University Lecturer in 1929 and a Fellow of Sidney Sussex in 1931. (Joan became a University Assistant Lecturer in 1934.) Austin had known Keynes since his undergraduate days—he had quickly been admitted to Keynes’s political economy club where, early on, he read a paper which made a big impression.<sup>4</sup> In 1934 Keynes invited him to become assistant editor of the *Economic Journal* with the consequence that Austin was eventually to write more reviews probably than any other economist before or since. The appointment also marks the start of his long association with the Royal Economic Society (RES) itself, editor for thirty-six years, secretary for twenty-five years (from which post he retired in 1970), and sixty years service in all to the society.<sup>5</sup>

### III

Dennis Robertson asked Austin to write the book on *Monopoly* for the respected ‘Cambridge Economic Handbooks’ series. Austin ended up writing two books (1931, 1941) as he cleared the ground for *Monopoly* by writing on *The Structure of Competitive Industry*, a project which became a book in its own right. Its *Economic Journal* reviewer, Philip Sargent Florence (to whose lectureship Austin had been appointed when Sargent Florence went to the Chair at Birmingham), rightly praised it as the potential classic it was to become—‘a most original contribution . . . lively style . . . obvious . . . fund of industrial experience to back it [up]—’ (Sargent Florence 1932: 66). He was as complimentary about *Monopoly* when nearly a decade later he was again the *Economic Journal* reviewer (perhaps as review editor, Austin wanted to see how Sargent Florence reacted second time around?). Sargent Florence gave the first book both high praise and stringent criticism. The praise was

<sup>3</sup> Joan returned before Austin and may have helped to draft parts of the report in the United Kingdom (Tahir 1990: 21).

<sup>4</sup> It was applauded: ‘a most unusual tribute’ (Cairncross 1993: 15).

<sup>5</sup> In a letter (22 November 1988) to Aubrey Silberston, who was then secretary of the RES, Austin set out his future agenda for both the society and journal. He wanted the society to speak for the profession as he felt it had in Keynes’s day and the journal to be the ‘journal of the profession as a whole’.

for the excellent structure of the argument which gave outstanding unity to the book. Austin looked at the optimum size of firms from a number of points of view—techniques, management, product(s), marketing, for example—then brought all these aspects together, reconciled in the size of a real firm. The criticism related to a fuzziness of definition, that in much of his argument, it was not clear whether Austin was referring to plants' 'scale of operations' or to firms' 'scale of organisation'. Nevertheless, Austin's work essentially established in an excellent way in Cambridge what we now call industrial organisation. He blended together a judicious mix of theory, facts, and policy—always his approach to economic issues—thus deserving 'the gratitude of all who wish to bring description closer to theoretical economics' (Sargent Florence 1932: 69). His reviewer had one main criticism of the second volume, that Austin confused the difficulties of creating a monopoly and circumventing competition with those of controlling an established monopoly. Despite this, Sargent Florence felt the author managed 'to pack in most of the real world of monopoly while arguing all the time patiently from first principles' (Sargent Florence 1941: 483).

Austin's Christianity and his interest in development came together when in the 1930s he took part in two major studies of African problems, the first of which required him to visit what is now Zambia. The Archbishop of York asked Pigou in 1932 to suggest someone to join a commission of enquiry under the auspices of the International Missionary Council, to spend six months in Africa analysing the impact of copper mining on indigenous society. Cairncross (1993: 51) says Austin's chapters in *Modern Industry and the African* 'constitute one of the first attempts by an economist to arrive at a view of what makes for successful economic development in a backward country'. There, he used the new ideas that were emerging in Cambridge as Keynes moved from *A Treatise on Money* (1930) to *The General Theory* (1936), spurred on by the criticisms and suggestions of the 'circus', of which Austin was a key member.<sup>6</sup> They gave him the rudiments of a national accounting framework in which to think about structures and imbalances as between rural and urban sectors, overseas trade and

<sup>6</sup> The 'circus' was a group of young economists—Austin and Joan Robinson, Piero Sraffa, Richard Kahn, and James Meade—who met to discuss the *Treatise on Money*. Their deliberations were usually reported to Keynes by Kahn who then conveyed Keynes's reaction to the 'circus' members, see Austin Robinson (1985) and Richard Kahn (1985) for their recollections.

development, and the impact of government expenditure and taxation on economic systems.

Austin was also always interested in individuals as such (and their groupings); so, as he thought about rural underemployment and poverty, he was keen to use the potential skills and aspirations of people *where they were*, rather than advocate large migrations or the creation of huge urban concentrations. In his letters he wrote much about the characteristics of the Africans with whom he came into contact, using as his *numeraire* the various groupings of Indians he had known and/or observed in the 1920s. He wrote reflecting first impressions: ‘In India where servants are perfect we say “This is evidently a servile race. They can’t rule themselves”. In South Africa we say “These people can’t even lay a table. How can they run a country?”’ (Cairncross 1993: 55). For him, economic development had to build on the characteristics of the people as they were, or would become, and he was what we would call now very much a ‘horses for courses’ person. He was always suspicious of all-purpose general theories and their accompanying models which were thought to be applicable regardless of time or place. In fact he said of the Cambridge developments of those years associated with Keynes and his colleagues:

It was . . . a great step forward in economic thought when Keynes insisted that we should have . . . a theory that was valid not only with full (or near-full) employment, but also with unemployment—and that we should know quite clearly which of the propositions of economics were universally valid, and which were valid only in conditions in which it might be true that an increase of one activity was possible *only* at the expense of another activity (Austin Robinson 1947: 44; emphasis in original).

His other work on Africa in the 1930s did not require him to go there but it was nevertheless a major contribution, two long chapters, 157 pages in all, in Lord Hailey’s *African Survey* (1938). Austin spent the vacations of the three years 1934–7 working in Chatham House on the chapters. The *Survey* itself was set up in response to an appeal by General Smuts in 1929—he called for a survey of Africa’s affairs as a whole, reviewing developments in each country and to what extent they were affected by and gained from modern knowledge. Austin drew on the work of S. F. Frankel on capital investment in Africa and Charlotte Leubuscher on African foreign trade for the external aspects (chapter 19), and on Hailey’s own ‘immensely conscientious’ notes for the internal aspects (chapter 20). The quality of Austin’s chapters was

such as to give the ‘chapters a place amongst the classics of economic literature’ (Noel Hall, quoted by Cairncross 1993: 73).

Austin increasingly assimilated the new lessons Keynes was developing, so much so that he was to review *The General Theory* (1936) for *The Economist* (29 February 1936), the only ever signed review in that journal (and then it was initials only, E.A.G.R.). Evidently the paper gave Austin’s review a title of which he disapproved (it was misleadingly—because far too narrow—called ‘Mr Keynes on Money’) and also may have altered the emphasis and balance by editorial cuts. When Austin complained to Keynes of this, Keynes said it served him right for publishing in the yellow press. The review was perceptive and accurate, as to the essential nature of the new theory. It could be read with profit today by modern students to allow them both to get the essence of the theory and of how the advanced world still works. Austin’s classical training was in evidence. In commenting on Keynes’s polemical passages, Austin wrote: ‘Like Horace’s schoolmaster, Mr Keynes whips his pupils into agreement, where modest reasonableness, many will feel [not Austin, though], would better have achieved this end’ (Austin Robinson 1936: 472).

What is illuminating, considering the muddled debates that were to occur, was that Austin had a clearer view of the meaning of the equality of saving and investment and the roles which it played in the analysis than perhaps even the author himself. He refers also to Keynes’s masterly and clear style in previous writings and deplores its comparative absence in *The General Theory*: ‘Many will sigh for the earlier Keynes who possessed in unusual bounty the gift of translating theoretical ideas into realities and conveying them in words of one syllable’ (Austin Robinson 1936: 472). Austin himself uses plain language to good effect both to describe the existence of the underemployment rest state and the process by which it may (or may not) be reached in the economy as a whole. His keen sense of industrial organisation is evident when he explains that the non-profitable levels of output as a whole away from the rest state mean that the positions are not sustainable, even in the short term.

#### IV

Austin spent the war years in Whitehall, working in two different sections. He went first to the Offices of the War Cabinet, subsequently



joining the Economic Section when it, and what became the Central Statistical Office, were set up. Austin came to Whitehall much impressed by Keynes's talk to the undergraduate Marshall Society in Cambridge on the issues contained in Keynes's booklet, *How to Pay for the War* (1940). It also convinced him of the fundamental need for reliable estimates of national income and expenditure on a continuing basis. These were to be provided by Austin recruiting James Meade 'to get the logic right' and Richard Stone for 'his remarkable familiarity with British economic statistics' (Cairncross 1993: 79). Cairncross tells us that Austin 'always regarded [getting] the annual national income accounts on a consistent basis as his chief contribution to the war' (Cairncross 1993: 79). In February 1942 Austin became the Economic Advisor and Head of the Programmes Division in the Ministry of Production. The lessons he learnt in these two sections he regarded as the most important elements in his long apprenticeship as an economist (Austin Robinson 1992: 219).

His wartime tasks and experiences reaffirmed his belief that macro-economic analysis without simultaneous attention to the micro-economic details of firms and industries, supplies of specific types of labour and capital goods, and of infrastructure, is seriously flawed. As someone who had absorbed Marshall very deeply, Austin always connected together the long-term development implications of short-term changes and vice versa.

After the war in Europe ended, Austin went to Germany as a member of a small committee on how Germany should be treated in the post-war era. Austin kept a diary which was 'remarkably lucid, coherent and perceptive [conveying] a remarkable picture of the contrasts between town and country, occupiers and occupied, movement on the roads and inertia elsewhere, devastation and disorder on the grand scale but some things still working normally and in good order' (Cairncross 1993: 91). In a letter to Keynes of 16 June 1945 Austin wrote: 'Fact, cold hard fact, is almost certainly different [but he] preferred [his] stories, and as the theologians say when pressed too hard, the story may convey the picture without being literally true' (Austin Robinson 1986a: preface, no page number.) Austin went on to Russia where he emphasised perceptively 'the complete ascendancy of defence over opulence in the mind of the Communist government—an ascendancy that continued throughout the postwar years in a measure unequalled anywhere else' (Cairncross 1993: 94).

Austin drew on his wartime experiences twenty years later when in

his Marshall Lectures of 1965, *Economic Planning in the United Kingdom: Some Lessons* (published in 1967), he set out what is still a blueprint for policy-making in a free society which is nevertheless determined to employ all its citizens and direct its overall development in the long term as well as in the short term. He returned to the same themes in his review article (Austin Robinson, 1986b) of Alec Cairncross's account of the transformation from war to peace (Cairncross 1985). As well as playing a key role in manpower planning during the war, Austin was also involved in the determination of the import needs and export possibilities of the United Kingdom in the post-war period. Though he applauded his general approach, Cairncross thought he was too pessimistic about the possible outcomes in his detailed estimates of what was possible and needed.

Austin was never persuaded on this and as late as 1986 pointed out that the original estimates, made in 1943, were made on the assumption that the war against Japan after Germany was defeated would be a long, drawn-out affair, eighteen months to two years or more. Dropping the atomic bombs in 1945 drastically shortened the relevant time period and brought forward the beginning of the transition. Austin argued that they had identified the main problems: the balance of payments where exports were no more than twenty-eight per cent of their 1938 volume. There were shortages of steel, timber, coal and energy generally, and also of certain labour skills. Cairncross summed up: '... when the risks are high, as they were in 1947, it is not the outcome that is the best measure of a man's judgement but how the risks seemed to good judges at the time, and there were few who foresaw a future materially more fortunate than [Austin] did' (Cairncross 1993: 108).

Austin returned to university life after the war, feeling that he was not 'tough enough to carry on indefinitely under the pressure [he] had worked during the [war] years' (Austin Robinson 1992: 218). (He certainly fooled us all!) His reputation was such that Whitehall and the Government would not let him go completely. Twice for extended periods he was called back at Stafford Cripp's insistence. He spent a year in London helping to draft the *Economic Survey for 1948* and the *Economic Survey for 1948-52*, six months in Paris with the Office of the European Economic Community (OEEC) ensuring that the Marshall Plan could go through. He chaired 'the committee that drafted the collective report to Congress, showing that we collectively had plans that would make us viable' (Austin Robinson 1992: 219). With that task done, his 'long apprenticeship' ended, he was on 'the threshold of a

subsequent forty years as an academic' (ibid.). Nevertheless, he kept his links with Government and Government service for many decades afterwards; he served on selection boards for the Civil Service and through the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) and development agencies, he influenced advice given and personnel chosen. His scholarly contributions were recognised by his election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1955.

## V

Increasingly in the post-war period, Austin was drawn towards the problems of developing countries. He was an indefatigable founder of and worker for the International Economic Association (IEA), of which he was Treasurer (1950–9), President (1954–62) and General Editor (1950–80). Austin edited or co-edited twelve volumes of its conferences, world and small. The bulk of them were concerned with development issues. To them all Austin made lucid, carefully considered contributions.<sup>7</sup>

Cairncross (1993) cites the IEA volumes either edited by Austin or to which he contributed chapters in his bibliography of Austin's writings. A selection of the titles alone indicate the breadth of Austin's interests and knowledge: *The Economic Consequences of the Size of Nations* (1960), 'Foreign trade in a developing economy', a chapter by Austin in Kenneth Berrill (ed.), *Economic Development with Special Reference to East Asia* (1964); *Problems in Economic Development* (1965); *The Economics of Education* (edited with John Vaizey, 1966); 'The desirable level of agriculture in advanced industrial economies', a chapter in Ugo Papi and Charles Nunn (eds.), *Economic Problems of Agriculture in Industrial Societies* (1969); *Backward Areas in Advanced Countries* (1969); *Economic Growth in South Asia* (edited with Michael Kidron, 1970); *The Economic Development of Bangladesh* (edited with Keith Griffin) (1974); *Appropriate Techniques for Third World Development* (1979).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ken Arrow and Tony Atkinson (July 1994) have written that Austin thought that the small conferences generated the most valuable discussions but in order to guard against exclusiveness he urged the need for regional conferences. 'As General Editor, he wielded his pencil forcefully'—the pay off was the academic quality of the conference volumes.

<sup>8</sup> I should also mention that Austin was at the 1975 S'Agaro Conference on the Micro-economic Foundations of Macroeconomics which I chaired. I expected we would jointly edit the volume of the same title (1977), but after I sent Austin a draft of the introduction he generously suggested that I do it alone.

His commentaries were always clearly expressed, he combined optimism tempered with caution, and he tried to delineate clearly the boundaries within which academic economists could speak with (relative) authority and outside of which they were trespassing without good reason. Thus in the 1960 volume (which arose from a conference held in 1957—as with the effects of changes in the quantity of money, the publication of IEA volumes is subject to uncertain and variable lags), he wrote that it was ‘not for us, as a group of academic economists, to reach political conclusions, and we made no attempt to do so’ (xxi). The subject of this particular conference—the relation of size to economic prosperity—had, its editor wrote, received very little discussion in the 180 years since the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*. Typically, Austin started by getting definitions straight and asking why the concept of a nation was relevant for economic analysis. He found the answer in the discontinuities which the boundary of a nation provides—some natural, some institutional, for example tariffs, limits on the movement of labour. In our day (Austin’s then), the nation had renewed itself because it had become the unit for Government action and economic activity. (Are we now leaving this era?)

Austin pointed out that the definition of size differed according to the purpose in hand. At the conference they examined the USA (a rich country), Switzerland, Belgium, and Sweden (which were exceptions to the size rule). Austin noted that Switzerland achieved necessary economies of scale by relying on export markets, while Belgium achieved high living standards by concentrating on the unfashionable factors of industrial efficiency and hard work (both dear to Austin’s heart). He pointed out that with few exceptions technical economies are exhausted by firms of quite moderate size. He also formed the impression that most of the major industrial economies of scale could be achieved by a relatively high income per capita country with a population of fifty million. Foreign trade could provide an escape (from size) but a precarious one and the economic arguments for further integration of nations, so as to create wider markets, were not overwhelmingly conclusive—the political arguments were, of course, another matter, a topical conclusion in 1996. Size was obviously useful for defence but not exclusively for anything else.

Austin’s chapter on foreign trade in developing countries in Kenneth Berrill’s 1964 IEA volume started with a list of intellectual debts: Ragnar Nurkse, Harry Johnson, Berrill himself, David Bensusan-Butt, Hla Myint, and Phyllis Deane. He first identified two impacts of

international trade on the development process. The first was positive: by aiding specialisation and accumulation in those activities in which productivity is highest, the process of development may be accelerated. The second, which was negative, arose because often the propensity to import runs ahead of the power to export, so imposing constraints associated with threatening balance of payments difficulties. If higher rates of interest are used, for example, to protect foreign exchange reserves they may lead to an uneasy equilibrium characterised by under-loading of the economy and a slow rate of development. Though the ratio of exports to imports reflects in the very long term the size of country concentration and range of endowments, the exports to income ratio is the ultimate constraint, a point which Austin illustrates by reference to the historical experience of the United Kingdom and Japan. A typical Austin emphasis is that the better use of resources may often have been more important than a slightly higher rate of accumulation.

He lists five channels of causation whereby a rise in the exports to income ratio may contribute to the acceleration of growth: by a transfer of resources from low to high productivity areas; by ridding any industry of dependence solely on home markets (but if this is achieved by foreigners' investing and producing the benefits to the home country may be minimal); by the spread of higher industrial efficiency first introduced through international trade; by what we now call the demonstration effect, knowledge of new products or products not previously known in the country leading to increased desires to produce them and for increased incomes to purchase them. The most important aspect for Austin though is that a high level of trade and possible imports provides a means of escape from both major and minor errors of planning and production. He illustrated these principles by looking at the experiences of India and Pakistan. An important emphasis that emerged was that he was sceptical of the potential of price changes, for example devaluations, as opposed to the power of income and quantity changes.

In his opening address to the Second World IEA Congress in Vienna in September 1962, the subject of which was the problems of economic development, Austin said that the topic was chosen deliberately, adding: 'Just as in the 1930s almost all schools of economists were concerned with problems of economic fluctuations . . . today [they were] mostly concerned with attempting to understand the causes of economic growth' (Austin Robinson 1965: xv). Austin expressed the wish that these developments would help to eliminate poverty which does so much damage to human happiness and that they would help to

close rather than to widen the gap between the poor and the rich nations. He referred to the profound difficulties associated with defining and measuring the stock of capital goods in a world of continually changing prices and technologies, adding that even more insoluble problems arise when we try to define and measure stocks of scientific and engineering knowledge or of freedom of opportunity—all variables which complement one another in the development process.

He criticised Rostow's (then) attempts to generalise historical experiences of rapid growth in more advanced economies and to apply this directly in policies for 'backward countries'. For Austin (as for Marshall) change is continuous, not abrupt, that is to say, in general there is no 'take-off'. Nevertheless, to increase the speed of development attention must be paid as much to creating the right institutions and economic framework as to potential supplies of capital. Especially vital is education to allow developing countries to absorb knowledge and skills. Reflecting the influence of Keynes and his followers, Austin referred to the need to understand the causes of fluctuations in the prices of primary products and to devise schemes to reduce them. Austin returned to the role of foreign trade in development, to export-led growth and balance of payments constraints. He stressed the need to model interrelationships between countries, taking explicit note of the sizes of price and especially of income elasticities of exports and imports. He urged that, in order for small emerging countries to escape from the penalties of smallness, markets be opened to both their traditional and newly emerging exports, even manufactures—still a tract for our times.

The quantity and quality of the population of nations was always a foremost concern of Austin's. He gave explicit voice to it in the volume on *The Economics of Education* (1966) which he edited with John Vaizey, a pioneer of the subject in the United Kingdom. In the introduction, Austin itemised the conceptual difficulties and the deficiencies of the available statistics. He was also careful to show that education was gravely misconceived if viewed solely (or even at all) as a consumption good. In these days of consumer sovereignty in all things, it is refreshing to be reminded that investment and production are vital aspects of economic and social life as well, and that while a balance must be struck, neglect of any is detrimental to human welfare. Austin has wise things to say about taking into account the future effects on activity of the stocks of educated persons as well as analysing the current flows; and that in our statistics, we neglect the collection of

data on the educational attainments of immigrants and emigrants at our peril.

In 1969 Austin edited a volume on backward areas in advanced countries. All advanced countries have such areas; one reason why they persist is because individual entrepreneurs cannot be expected to take into account all the factors which from a national point of view are relevant for the location of industries. Austin was (and remained) an unrepentant interventionist. He argued that with the possible exception of the USA, people were not indifferent to where they live or have lived. It followed that the principles of international trade rather than the analysis of a single country were appropriate for considering backward areas and what may be done about them.

*Appropriate Technologies for Third World Development* (1979) was a topic especially suited to Austin's humanitarianism and 'nuts and bolts' philosophy. All his working life he emphasised that development on the spot using already established communities was most to be preferred. Promoting the appropriate technologies for such a process had been hampered by artificially cheap capital facilities, tax holidays, and similar measures. He also stressed that there are appropriate products as well as methods of production, very much a close-to-the-ground view which reflected his frustrated engineer side—as did his emphasis on the crucial role which the ability to provide adequate maintenance of machines plays in the process of development.

Other volumes which he edited relate to developing countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, on which we comment below. Austin also wrote many reports on development themes. His biographer, Alec Cairncross, has singled out for special praise a report for the United Nations Development Programme, which Austin wrote in the mid-1970s at the request of I. G. Patel (who had been his pupil in the 1940s). Cairncross regards it as the single best and most impressive account of the principles of development to come from Austin's pen. We discuss now its main features, features already present in embryo in his 1920s work in India and 1930s work in Africa.<sup>9</sup>

His focus was on 'the massive underemployment and unemployment in many developing countries'. Austin asks why they are so persistent and he sets out six constraints on a policy of increasing

<sup>9</sup> This section is based on the 1996 Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture (Harcourt, forthcoming). The page references (150–2) are to Alec Cairncross's discussion of the report (Cairncross 1993).

demand to draw these workers into employment and allow incomes to rise.

The usually dominant constraint is the failure of domestic food production to match expanding incomes, so that import demand rises. Unless exports match this, expansion is constrained by balance of payments problems. Austin's orders of magnitude for a typical developing country with population growth of two-and-a-half per cent a year and a target growth rate of seven per cent a year is that the constraint will bite if agricultural output does not grow by five per cent a year. Top priority must therefore be given to overcoming this constraint by creating the necessary agricultural surplus.

Austin also stressed that the 'weakness in the exchange mechanism between town and country was sometimes the main constraint'. Undernourished farm workers consumed the additional food so that the demands of the urban population, swollen by an inflow from rural areas, went into imports: hence the need for effective organisation for buying, financing, transporting, and distributing the agricultural surplus needed in the city. As befits an economist of the same university as Malthus, Austin also recognised the need to limit the import content of consumer goods, not least 'luxury' goods.

The fourth limitation was inadequate accumulation due to low saving rates, inefficient methods of finance and also the high import content of investment.

The fifth and sixth constraints are associated with the limitations of skills available—administrative as well as productive, especially in industry where education systems may not be geared to produce them. Austin thought it may be necessary to create "small-scale low-capital-intensive occupations" with "very large numbers of small craftsmen, traders, entrepreneurs starting successful small business" (151) in order to bypass the problem.

Strangely, Austin does not mention cultural factors which could be an important part of the explanation of differences between countries, for example acceptance of discipline in the industrial sector: strange, because, as we have seen, his letters from India and Africa are full of details on just these characteristics of the local populations.

Austin then discussed the dual economy aspect of development—the contrast between modern sectors and traditional sectors, and the choice this raises of whether to go for rapid development through faster growth and lower capital inputs per jobs, or a gradual transition and the



consequent need to 'revitalise and reinvigorate the traditional economy'. He had advocated the latter advance in the 1930s.

Finally, he recognised fully the problems associated with rapid population growth which in some cases meant absorbing 'as much as three quarters of all national investment . . . in merely standing still' (152).

We may illustrate Austin's approach, in particular, his well developed sense of relevant orders of magnitude in the simple macro development models which he carried in his head, by briefly examining the arguments of his Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture, 'The economic development of Malthusia' (Austin Robinson 1974), which was given in Cambridge on 6 March 1974. There, he used Bangladesh as his example. He started by stating the question which was asked '[o]ne hundred and seventy five years ago [by] a shy young Fellow of Jesus'. The question is 'whether economic development was possible, or whether it would be frustrated by the growth of population' (Austin Robinson 1974: 521). To say that 'Malthus has been discredited by subsequent history' is, says Austin, 'a very dangerous half truth', for while the advanced countries have broken through the Malthusian barrier into cumulative growth, the rest of the world has not; it 'continues to live under conditions of near stagnation, little above the subsistence level, in very much the conditions that Malthus envisaged' (Austin Robinson 1974: 521).

Austin worked out two scenarios for the next twenty years in Bangladesh according to whether it continued with Malthusian-type birth and death rates, or with European-type through which it had broken out of the Malthusian trap. He relates these statistical exercises to the actual plans then being proposed in Bangladesh. His sense of the interrelationships of the broad aspects of the economy is beautifully done. He shows that in the most favourable scenario, a considerable proportion of the problems of unemployment, underemployment and poverty would be overcome by the end of the period; while with the other scenario, Malthus's worst fears would have been realised and an opportunity available now (1974) would have been lost for ever. It is pleasing to report in 1996 that Austin's 'waking hopes' (Austin Robinson 1974: 532) are nearer to being achieved than his worst fears realised (see, for example, Reddaway (1996)).

## VI

In the Faculty of Economics and Politics itself, Austin not only taught but also played a major role in its administration. The building which now bears his name (it was so christened at the party in honour of his ninetieth birthday) is very much the outcome of his enthusiasm and persistence. Austin was appointed to a Chair in 1950. As well as lecturing and supervising, Austin had long spells as Secretary of the Faculty Board and also as its Chairman. The clashes between the Keynesians and the Robertsonians were fierce and unyielding in the post-war years. Austin did his best to bring peace and maintain cohesion. James Meade, who came to Cambridge in the late 1950s and who was witness to some of the toughest debates, thought that Austin tried hard to be fair and obtain principled compromises, even if often in practice they favoured one side more than the other. In any event, Austin was faced with a virtually impossible task in a faculty where consensus is defined as agreeing with whoever is speaking.

In September 1965 Austin retired from his Chair (he was succeeded by Joan). He was to have nearly thirty years more of extremely active life. He was physically frail towards the end—he was knocked off his bicycle by a motorist about ten years before he died and injured his back. It continued to trouble him despite the efforts of a renowned osteopath who ministers, usually most effectively, to the underworld of the back sufferers of Cambridge, including the present writer. Nevertheless, some of his best papers were written in his eighties and early nineties. The editors of the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* often used him as a reliable, critical, but fair-minded referee. In a book published in 1984, *Economics in Disarray*, Austin's contribution, a comment on Peter Wiles on the full-cost principle, stands out for its clarity and deep economic intuition. It reflects his knowledge of firms, his exchanges in the 1950s with the full-cost theorists of Oxford, and his experiences from his years as a Syndic of the Cambridge University Press. And, of course, he wrote his superb autobiographical essay. 'My apprenticeship as an economist' for Szenberg's 1992 volume on *Eminent Economists*, which, together with his obituary of Keynes in the March 1947 *Economic Journal*, most typically reflect Austin's great strengths as an economist, perceptive human being, and elegant stylist.

## VII

Austin was elected to a Fellowship in Sidney Sussex in 1931. From then on the college was a central focus of his life, especially after Joan died in 1983 and Austin moved from the house in Grange Road to a flat opposite the college itself. Roger Andrew, a former Bursar of Sidney who was close to Austin, writes: '[Austin's] enthusiasm for the College and his concern for it [are] known only to those within its framework. The ideal for College life is the City State of Plato in which like minds administer and further the affairs of the establishment. Austin filled this position admirably . . . His philosophy was to guide and to bring those other members by persuasion to a similar belief'. His daughter, Barbara Jeffrey, writes that 'he also felt it was important to college life that people should be able to get on well with one another'.

In his address at the Memorial Service for Austin in November 1993, Alan Hughes, Austin's colleague and an economics Fellow of Sidney, spoke of Austin's role as an active member of the investments committee responsible for the management of the stock-market portfolio set up in the 1960s, of his many gifts of, for example, silver plate and carpets for public rooms and of the 'exceptionally generous bequest to Sidney to further education and research'. He described Austin in retirement 'as a familiar figure in college, especially in the continuation of his life-long association with the chapel. His interest in sport . . . meant that any other fellow with a similar interest in following [horse racing, and rugby] on TV would often find an agreeable companion in Austin', not least because of the wine he provided to offset the bitter reaction to an Oxford try on 'a gloomy mid-winter Tuesday'.

## VIII

Austin had a long life, worked extraordinarily hard, and was associated with a breath-taking number of institutions in academia, Government, and internationally. Of all these institutions he was, in his own words, a willing 'slave'. As with many of his generation, he found delegation difficult and this caused clashes and misunderstandings, sometimes leaving Austin feeling hurt and unappreciated by other officers of the organisations for which he worked so hard and, overall, served so well.

I wrote to a selection of people from these and other institutions who knew Austin, asking for their impressions and evaluations. What

emerged is the respect and affection in which he was held in so many spheres: respect for his outstanding abilities, affection for him as a person even though his stature and personality were such that I do not think my correspondents felt they were able to get really close to him, much as they may have wished to.

I start with Gavin Reid (14 September 1993) who came to know Austin when at Darwin on a sabbatical in 1987–8. Reid ‘was impressed with his willingness to extend courtesy to an academic transient’, and he thought that Austin set ‘very high standards’ which nevertheless were achievable by ‘mere mortals’.

Robin Matthews (6 March 1994) worked closely with Austin in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s in the Faculty and also on the *Economic Journal* when Matthews was review editor. He singled out Austin’s contributions to economics, emphasising the *range* of topics to which he made original contributions. Though Austin did not keep up to date with the literature, he ‘had a knack of identifying what was important’. Matthews identified four fields: firm and industry, development economics, ‘practical macro’ from the viewpoint of the economic advisor (all predictable), and the economics of R and D; not so predictable, but just as impressive. Matthews concluded that Austin was a most serious and optimistic economist who ‘believed that economics was capable of doing good’.

Frank Hahn’s views (6 June 1994) are, as ever, complementary to those of Matthews.

Austin was a born ‘mandarin’ . . . impatient of theory which abstracted from the ‘real world’. His aim was to improve the world whether it was the small world of Cambridge, the Indian subcontinent or the Royal Economic Society. His memoranda . . . were perfect instances of what such writings should be: lucid, precise, and brief.

Referring to Austin’s many years as Secretary of the RES, Hahn highlights Austin’s role ‘as the moving force getting Keynes’ writings collected and edited’, a judgement which is echoed by several other economists who knew the background story to the Keynes papers. Hahn concluded:

Austin was socially a cut above many of his more recent colleagues. He had enormous self-confidence, and spoke in upper-class Cambridge English. He was also apt to favour those he knew—especially in Cambridge—when it came to jobs and honours. This was not really a sign of the ‘old school tie’ syndrome. He simply took it for granted that the best minds, and indeed the morally most reliable minds, were to be found in Cambridge. After that he

would allow some merit to Oxford and London, but not much beyond that. This was a failing, but one found it hard to blame him for being faithful to beliefs formed when England and its Universities were very different from what they are now.

Hahn's conclusion is, I believe, accurate, revealing of both writer and subject, stating things which ought to be stated but which could only be done by someone with Hahn's insight and self-confidence.

Austin was long associated with the NIESR. Two former Directors, Bryan Hopkin and David Worswick, sent me recollections of Austin's role there and much else besides. Bryan was a pupil of Austin's at Cambridge in the 1930s, David was an Oxford graduate. Their appraisals naturally differ, at least on the surface but not on fundamentals if read carefully between the lines, especially Worswick's. Worswick tells an amusing tale of how, at Robert Hall's prompting, he concocted a seventy-and-over rule to rid the Executive Committee of Austin and one other 'old man' (which soon took off Hall himself). To their credit, 'both departed gracefully . . . without enquiring too closely into the origin of the rule'. Worswick then described his personal experiences of working with Austin when Worswick was President of the RES and in the IEA, when he often remembered that rule. He could not condone Austin treating the edition of the Keynes papers and the IEA as 'personal fiefdoms'. His reason told that it would have been better if Austin had brought in more and younger people to take over some of his responsibilities. Yet, Worswick concluded, Austin 'was so good at what he did . . . that [he was] not so sure!'

Hopkin (5 June 1994) reported on Austin's massive contributions during Hopkin's time as Director (1952–7). Austin 'took a detailed interest in all the work . . . going on, [gave] wise and informed counsel . . .' and personal support to Hopkin. Austin was the ideal person to fill such a role because he knew and was respected by so many people, he criticised work incisively but gently, and was well behaved even in the most difficult circumstances.

I turn now to American evaluations, starting with Paul Samuelson's (7 July 1994), and then Bob Solow's (17 June 1994). When President of the IEA, Samuelson 'was most content to have [Austin] run me and all in sight'. He thought that, as an economist, Austin was original and lucid, that he had good judgement which was not affected by dislike or personality. He considered it remarkable that he 'never heard [Austin] utter a sour criticism of any in the Cambridge menagerie'. Solow praised Austin's role in the IEA, highlighting the length of the

conferences under Austin's guidance, which enabled serious discussion of papers, and that Austin's force of character made sure that authors wrote the papers that the conference needed. Solow liked Austin, not least for his plain speaking, which contrasted with '[a] lot of Cambridge conversation [which struck Solow] as a move in a game (whose rules and objectives [he did not] know)'. I wish to emphasise the importance of the views of Samuelson and Solow—both liked Austin 'a lot'—because another distinguished American economist felt that Austin did not like Americans and that he was, in a thoughtless English way, anti-Semitic—as well as being imperious and overbearing on occasions.

In the body of the essay I tried to give due weight to Austin's contributions to development economics. One person who knew of these at first hand is Esra Bennathan. In a letter of 18 July 1992 to Alec Cairncross (which they kindly let me see), Bennathan mentions that after being interviewed by Austin for the Civil Service in 1961 he discovered that an 'admired colleague' at Birmingham regarded 'Austin with the utmost suspicion, a dangerous figure of the Establishment, a duplicitous nature hiding behind an ascetic and saintly face'. Bennathan's long experience of Austin was 'totally different'. His lengthy letter is concerned not only with Austin's crucial gifts as an economist but also with his practical Christianity, especially in helping academics in what became Bangladesh both to escape persecution and to build up their libraries and laboratories.

Bennathan summed up his idea of Austin's 'private and instinctive' approach to development issues: '[Austin] work[ed] through and for people . . . . [He] . . . measur[ed] his effectiveness by his effect upon them, their actions and their progress . . . [Austin] nurtur[ed], encourag[ed] and sponsored those he [thought] promising, without expecting too much'. Bennathan found this totally impressive and sympathetic.

Finally, Bennathan quotes the oral tradition that Keynes regarded Austin as 'his brightest student'. [Bennathan] had 'never heard a clearer explanation of Ramsey's social utility function, and the asymptote to Bliss, than that given by Austin in the Diamond Hotel, Poona, surrounded . . . by very actively loving American couples relaxing from meditative exertions in Rashneeshi's Ashram just round the corner'.

I. G. Patel (5 July 1955) knew Austin as a supervisor (1946–9) and then 'in many capacities'—visits to India (sometimes as a family guest), IEA conferences, consultant to UNDP, Council of the RES. His first impression of him was 'of a very generous and rather shy and

self-effacing person'; his final summing up: 'Generous, self-effacing and deeply committed'.

Hans Singer (4 October 1994) also paid tribute to Austin's generosity and first-rate intelligence. Austin was the secretary of 'a small committee at Cambridge' set up in the early 1930s to help two German refugee students of whom Singer was one. Though not Singer's Ph.D. supervisor, Austin gave him 'invariably helpful' advice on some problems in his dissertation. Austin's 'empirical approach and clear language were a great help to a new arrival, bewildered . . . by the incomprehensible lectures and papers by Wittgenstein and Piero Sraffa [as well as] by the intricacies of liquidity preference'. Always 'young Singer' to Austin, 'up to shortly before his death people . . . from Cambridge [carried] greetings from [Austin] to "young Singer"'.

Perhaps Susan Howson (3 October 1994) may be allowed a last word: 'I have a great admiration, as well as love, for Austin, who always struck me as one of the most sane members of our profession'.

## IX

To the end of his life, Austin remained mentally rigorous and alert. During the alarm a few years ago about the impact on health of certain French cheeses, Austin was asked at lunch in Sidney Sussex by a Fellow in his late eighties whether they should eat them. Austin said: 'It is only dangerous for pregnant women and old people—and we do not belong to either category'. Austin had a fine sense of humour which was often combined with sharp, even wicked end lines about his contemporaries, delivered with a twinkle. He enjoyed gossip and barbed, but not malicious comments in private, for he was, first and foremost a kindly man, who nevertheless was realistic about, and comforted by the fact that foibles as well as achievements characterise the human condition.

Though Austin is on record as saying that the optimum length of time to see a grandchild is half an hour, both he and Joan were proud and fond of their five grandchildren and had, especially after the arrival of grandchildren, excellent rapport with their daughters and their respective husbands, who in turn appreciated the love and support they could depend upon. In May 1993, Austin had a bad fall and was taken to Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge. He died peacefully on

the morning of 1 June, having heard some of his favourite Bible readings and prayers the night before.

Austin Robinson was the role model *par excellence* for the aspiring applied political economist. At his Memorial Service in Sidney Sussex Chapel on 20 November 1993, one of the readings was the parable of the talents. Some thought this a peculiar choice; but a close friend who knew Austin intimately thought it peculiarly appropriate because Austin could not abide those who did not use their talents to the full. For Austin economics was a 'hands on' subject—the sole object of theory was for it to be applied to explanation and then to policy proposals: 'no economist is more dangerous than the pure theorist without practical experience and instinctive understanding of the real world that he is attempting to analyze, seeking precision in a world of imprecision, in a world he does not understand' (Austin Robinson 1992: 221). His Christian upbringing, in which works were emphasised even more than faith, and his wartime experiences led him to a life of service to his discipline and to humanity, and especially to those least able to help themselves, victims of both oppression and the malfunctionings of social systems.

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