



BOB BLACK

Robert Denis Collison Black

1922–2008

Early years

ROBERT DENIS COLLISON BLACK, Bob Black to an international circle of friends, was born 11 June 1922 at Morehampton Terrace, Dublin.¹ His father, William Robert Black, was company secretary for a small group of companies in the grain trade.² His mother was Rosa Anna Mary, née Reid. Dublin at the time of Black's birth was experiencing considerable disturbance, though he rarely alluded to this.³

Black was educated at Sandford Park School, Dublin. However he became disenchanted with the school⁴ and contrived, astonishingly, to enter Trinity College, Dublin at the age of 15. Even more remarkably, he seems to have managed perfectly well as a 15-year old amongst much older students. He managed to complete two undergraduate degree courses. He enrolled for a commerce degree, but Trinity at that time required those

¹The family moved to Waltham Terrace when Black was five. Bob Black gave a long and detailed interview to Antoin Murphy and Renee Prendergast which was published in his Festschrift. See A. Murphy and R. Prendergast (eds.), *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought. Essays in Honour of R. D. C. Black* (London, 2000), p. 3.

²Black gave another interview which is recorded in K. Tribe, *Economic Careers. Economics and Economists in Britain 1930–1970* (London, 1997). See Tribe, p. 96, for the occupation of Black's father. The latter was a considerable expert in his field. I can remember Black telling me how he could sniff a handful of grain and detect its origin.

³As an illustration of the fact that, in the 1960s, his mother's memory of distant events was better than of more recent ones, he told me that she had recently informed him that while she was in labour in 1922, ricochet bullets were hitting the house.

⁴Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, p. 86.

wishing to graduate BA to have taken a separate course in addition to a vocational one. While a pass course, which would fulfil this requirement, was available, Black considered this a waste of time, and was successful in his application to enter for the Moderatorship in Economics and Political Science.⁵ It is clear that economics at Trinity at that time was on the rise, with the appointment of George Duncan, first as Fellow of Trinity in 1930, and then, in 1934, as the successor to the famous Charles Bastable in the Whately Professorship of Political Economy, a position once occupied by Mountifort Longfield.

Duncan was a remarkable individual who had begun as a classicist, and then learned economics to a high level with an extraordinary rapidity. He was described by Black as 'a sort of Austro-Swedish economist'.⁶ Instead of teaching partial equilibrium through Marshall, as would have been the norm in British universities, he used to teach general equilibrium through Cassel. His approach to macroeconomics was through Lindahl, Myrdal and Hayek.

Duncan, who lived the extraordinary lifespan of 1902–2005, was closely associated intellectually with Mises and Hayek, and a member of the Mount Pelerin Society, of which six of the thirty-six founding members were the recipients of Nobel Prizes. He had a number of brilliant students, including W. J. L. Ryan and Terence Gorman.⁷ His teaching itself was, by all accounts, brilliant but extremely demanding. In a reminder of how times have changed, Black recounts how, if students of Duncan did not understand something, they went and read it up. In particular they struggled with the Austrian theory of capital.⁸

While Black in various accounts stressed the Continental nature of Duncan's teaching, it does rather look from a later vantage point as if Duncan had taught himself economics on the basis of LSE reading lists. The interest in the literature to which Duncan paid attention was strong at LSE; Robbins read about general equilibrium in Cassel,⁹ Hayek was appointed Tooke Professor in 1932, and Brinley Thomas spent two years in Sweden with the avowed aim of becoming an expert on the Swedish

⁵Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, p. 87. The Economics and Political Science Moderatorship was a four-year course.

⁶Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, p. 89. See also the introductory essay which Black wrote for his collected volume, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context* (Aldershot, 1995), p. xii.

⁷See Antoin Murphy, 'George Alexander Duncan, 1902–2005', *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*, 9 (2006), 71–4.

⁸Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, pp. 91, 94.

⁹L. C. Robbins, *Autobiography of an Economist* (London, 1971), p. 105.

macroeconomic literature. But the LSE reading lists also involved another significant element, in addition to the ‘Austro-Swedish’ one, which was to be important in Black’s work—classical economics. While all of the books which Black mentions in his interview with Keith Tribe, including Cassel,¹⁰ were to be found on the LSE reading list, there were others which looked not out to Continental Europe but back to the classical literature. In particular there was Cannan’s *Wealth* and Taussig’s *Principles* (though Black says that while the latter book was recommended by Duncan, it did not help much with his course). The American economist Taussig was imbued with the classical literature, and even wrote a book on the classical concept of the wage fund. His *Principles* was certainly a text in common use at LSE.¹¹

The examinations for this demanding course were themselves demanding; there was no choice of examination questions, and candidates were required to do all six questions on a paper. It was with evident relief that Black told an interviewer that he got a First.¹²

Graduating in 1941, Black could simply have coasted to an MA in the Oxbridge style (he was awarded one in 1945), but he wanted to do post-graduate work. Having come across the name of Mountifort Longfield, the first occupant of the Whately chair, in the course of reading Ohlin’s book on trade,¹³ as recommended by George Duncan, Black approached Duncan with the suggestion that he might be allowed to do research on Longfield. Duncan agreed to supervise this, and Black worked ferociously hard, submitting his Ph.D. thesis as early as April 1943. His background in classical economic literature provided a solid foundation for Black’s research, which was to prove of lasting value.

Black also volunteered for the Irish army reserve, in which he served as a medical orderly and in which he frequently encountered the famous humorist Patrick Campbell, later Lord Glenavy. Fortunately the military duties did not take too much time. For in 1942–3, at the age of 20, Black began teaching at Trinity. When, in October 1943, Duncan was called to London to undertake civil service work, Black was appointed Deputy for

¹⁰Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, pp. 90–1.

¹¹I have the two volumes of F. W. Taussig, *Principles of Economics*, 3rd edn. (New York, 1927), belonging to a former student, dating from her time at LSE at the start of the 1930s. See also F. W. Taussig, *Wages and Capital. An Examination of the Wages Fund Doctrine* (New York and London, 1896).

¹²Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, p. 92.

¹³B. Ohlin, *Interregional and International Trade* (Cambridge, MA, 1933).

the Whately Professor, in which role he served until 1945, teaching no less than two-thirds of Duncan's course. This left little time for research, though he did manage to compile a bibliography of writings on economics by members of Trinity College, an activity which not only provided valuable research material but which was to be involved in a singular episode with Jacob Viner later in Black's career.

When Duncan returned to Trinity in 1945, Black was able to resume research full time, and was appointed to an Assistant Lectureship at Queen's University, Belfast. There were other stars joining the department—Duncan Black and Tom Wilson, though they moved on to Glasgow and Oxford respectively¹⁴—and the department was later joined by another future leading academic figure, Bruce Williams. Despite the burden of preparing new lectures, while awaiting the arrival of a full complement of staff released from wartime duties, Black achieved rapid and early publication, something which was acutely necessary in the organisation of Queen's, and in 1946 he was promoted to a lectureship which carried with it tenure. He was to stay at Queen's for forty years.

The Dublin economists

Black's publication career began early. As he later recounted,¹⁵ he typed his paper 'Trinity College, Dublin, and the Theory of Value, 1832–1863'¹⁶ on his father's ancient Remington. This paper was the outcome of his work on Longfield and his subsequent work in the Trinity College Library, during periods snatched from preparing teaching in the absence of George Duncan. He sent the paper to *Economica* without any great hope of success, and it was accepted.¹⁷ The article, which remains a landmark, demonstrated the healthy independence of thought in Trinity which was still evident a century later when Black took his degree. Though Longfield, the first occupant of the Whately chair, had started from Ricardo, he had applied to this source a critical mind and come to the conclusion that it was 'to be blunt' all wrong. As a result Longfield produced extraordinary

¹⁴ Black, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*, p. xiv.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiii

¹⁶ *Economica*, NS 12 (1945), 140–8.

¹⁷ 'I decided I might as well try sending it to a well-known journal first; it could at worst only be rejected so I posted it off to *Economica* and was very pleasantly surprised to receive a letter from the editor, F. A. Hayek, saying that it had been accepted and would appear in the August, 1945 issue.' Black, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*, p. xiii.

work on value and distribution which, as Black's paper showed, would have saved an awful lot of time and trouble for subsequent generations, had it been widely known. Not only would it have saved J. S. Mill from being held up to ridicule after his 1848 declaration that there was nothing else to be said on the theory of value, but the whole process of the marginal revolution itself would have been far less dramatic. It probably helped Black himself, and thus the subsequent generations which have enjoyed the benefit of this article, that Hayek was the editor of *Economica* at that time, for he believed that all advances in economics had come through subjectivism,¹⁸ and this was the key element in the Trinity tradition which Black brought out. No doubt Lionel Robbins would have been consulted about the article, and would have found it appealing on both historical and theoretical grounds.

This article was only the start of a long series of publications on Irish economic theory and its applications to the problems of Ireland. Two articles appeared in the Trinity journal *Hermathena* in 1947 and 1948,¹⁹ dealing at greater length with the contributions of the Trinity College economists. On the basis of his detailed researches, Black was able to state that 'Indeed it may reasonably be claimed that in the past century the economists of Trinity College have been responsible for original contributions to almost every branch of their subject.'²⁰ Indeed they had. They had pioneered work on value and distribution on the basis of subjective valuations, with wages based upon marginal utility product, and the capital theory had been built around the two key concepts of time and productivity. In addition, as Black showed in the second article, fundamental contributions to the theory of international trade had been made by Longfield and by Isaac Butt, and later by Cairnes and Bastable. Longfield made a particularly important contribution in explaining the basis of comparative advantage as lying in productivity and relative international wage levels; Isaac Butt, who was an advocate of protectionism, put forward the classical case for protection in a situation of less than full employment; Cairnes integrated the idea of non-competing groups with trade theory; and the whole approach was developed further by Bastable who introduced an analysis of the balance of payments with the role of varying income level made explicit. This was in addition to his pioneering work on public finance. These economists, too, faced with the hardships

¹⁸ F. A. Hayek, 'Scientism and the study of society', *Economica*, NS 9 (1942), 267-91, at 281.

¹⁹ 'Economic Studies at Trinity College, Dublin', Parts I and II, *Hermathena*, 70 (1947), 65-80, *Hermathena*, 71 (1948), 52-63.

²⁰ *Hermathena*, 70 (1947), 68.

of Ireland, considered at length the possible role of State intervention and even of redistribution.

Black was to return to these issues later in his introduction to Longfield's economic writings.²¹ In this, in addition to reviewing the work on micro-economics, he also wrote about Longfield's work on monetary matters (where he placed Longfield alongside the Currency School) and the question of redistribution. He accepted that there is a strange dichotomy in Longfield's Lectures, to which Alan Tait has also drawn attention,²² and which is indeed obvious to any reader. But he pointed out that the real originality lay in material from Lecture VI onwards. He did not claim that Longfield had anticipated neoclassical economics completely—which would have been an unreasonable expectation—but he correctly pointed to the superiority of Longfield's work over that of Bailey, Senior and W. F. Lloyd, in matters of value and distribution. In addition there was the impressive work on comparative advantage, which certainly went further than anything to be found in the English literature, as well as a penetrating analysis by Longfield of the problem of international transfers, both with respect to the terms of trade and to employment. As he correctly concluded, the neglect of Longfield by both classical and neoclassical economists is an extraordinary episode in the history of economics.

In a 1982 paper, 'Political Economy and the Irish',²³ Black brought out the difficulties which the Trinity economists had clearly discerned in the wholesale application of the classical model to Ireland, and noted that the historical economists Ingram and Leslie, both of whom he admired, had been even less impressed with its applicability. In 'Irish Dissenters', of 1983,²⁴ Black ably opposed the attempts of the Sraffians, Hollander and Moss, to play down the importance of the Trinity College economists. Given their importance, it may be wondered why Black never directly confronted Galbraith's idiotic remark to a television audience that all countries had produced notable economists except Ireland.²⁵ Though there are comments relating to this in the 1982 paper, the clearest response is to be found in a paper prepared for his visit to Japan in 1980 under the auspices of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, a paper which does not seem to have been published and which Black omitted from his 1995

²¹ *The Economic Writings of Mountifort Longfield* (New York, 1971).

²² A. C. Tait, 'Mountifort Longfield, 1802–84; economist and lawyer', *Hermathena*, 133 (1982), 15–28.

²³ *History of Economics Society Bulletin*, 4 (1982), 33–47.

²⁴ 'The Irish dissenters and nineteenth-century political economy', *Hermathena*, 135 (1983), 120–37.

²⁵ J. K. Galbraith, *The Age of Uncertainty* (London, 1977), p. 13.

bibliography.²⁶ In this paper, ‘A Review of the work of Irish Economists in the nineteenth century’, he presents many of the great names in Irish economics from Cantillon to Edgeworth, though oddly missing out the brilliant Robert Torrens. He again draws attention to the contributions of Longfield, Butt and Lawson, and to Hancock’s supply and demand theory of market price. The paper also contains a dignified and thoughtful response to Samuel Hollander’s remarkable claim that Ricardo afforded an important role to demand and that Longfield was a Ricardian, and to Laurence Moss’s downplaying of the originality of the Trinity College school of economics.²⁷ As he told the interviewers for his Festschrift, ‘Longfield is a conclusive refutation of the idea that it is all in Ricardo.’²⁸

Theory and policy

Both parts of Black’s undergraduate training in economics, the classical and the Austro-Swedish, had provided an excellent foundation for this work. It was the first of these in particular which was to serve as the foundation for his next, and extremely important, work, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817–1870*.²⁹ He had already been moved, following discussion with Bruce Williams, by the idea that the interaction of theory and policy was a promising area, and he began with a pilot project dealing with Anglo-Irish trade relations at the end of the eighteenth century, using the Foster collection of pamphlets in Queen’s.³⁰ As his interest in this area developed, he was awarded a Rockefeller postdoctoral fellowship for 1950–1, to study at Princeton under the famous Jacob Viner. He obtained an almost unprecedented year’s leave of absence from Queen’s, and departed for the United States with the intention of studying British free trade and American protectionism in the nineteenth century.

²⁶ I have been unable to discover from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science whether the paper was ever published in Japanese. The current author has a copy of the typescript.

²⁷ ‘A review of the work of Irish economists’, pp. 13–20.

²⁸ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 6. It was however as late as 1996 that Black finally solved the problem of why Longfield never gained his deserved reputation in economics. It was because his whole efforts were focused on his career as a lawyer, and the Whately Lectures were only an interval in this. Once he had been offered the Regius Chair of Law, he had gained the legal advancement which he sought. Letter of 8 March, 1996.

²⁹ Cambridge, 1960.

³⁰ ‘Theory and policy in Anglo-Irish trade relations 1775–1800’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry of Ireland*, 18 (1950), 3–15.

It is as well that Bob Black liked travel. For the modern academic can have little conception of what it was like in that era. This was a time in which exchange control was rigorous. While the less scrupulous found their way round this through concealing currency around their persons—even in their shoes—for exchange at a free-market rate abroad, Black had to settle for £50 at an exchange rate of \$2.80, less commission. It did not go very far. Fortunately his resilience extended to the American immigration service; when challenged about the clarinet he was carrying, with the suggestion that he might be trying to sneak into the United States as a professional musician, Black volunteered to disprove that theory by playing it.

When he met Viner, the latter was unimpressed by the intended research project. He rightly changed the research topic to theory and policy for Ireland, rather than dealing with American protectionism, and arranged this with the Rockefeller Foundation. From then on Black developed a quite extraordinary rapport with Viner, whose abrasiveness is even now the stuff of legend in American academic life. This rapport was due to Black's personal qualities, coupled with his great respect and admiration for the quite remarkable knowledge of classical economics which Viner possessed. Indeed Black later recounted that 'Viner showed me what scholarship really was.'³¹ This rapport is all the more remarkable because Black's first meeting with Viner was intimidating. Viner's omnivorous reading had included the 1945 bibliography of Trinity College economic writings, published in *Hermathena*,³² and he had noticed an obscure omission from this, about which he challenged Black in his characteristic style.³³

Black seems to have taken to American academic life with gusto. He acquired new horizons and new friends, and enjoyed the richness of American academic life which he may have found less frenetic and abrasive in that era. He enjoyed the great American libraries, and met impor-

³¹ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 11.

³² *Hermathena*, 66 (1945), 55–68.

³³ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 9. The omission was of Denis Caulfield Heron, 1824–81. The likelihood is that Viner had been alerted to this by looking at a copy of Black's essay on the history of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society. See *The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland. Centenary Volume 1847–1947* (Dublin, 1947). Pages 1–47 of that *Centenary Volume* contain Black's history of the Society, and this is followed by a series of eighteen biographical sketches of those associated with the Society, pp. 48–85. One of those was Heron, whose publications are mentioned. Indeed the index to the *Centenary Volume* lists no fewer than nine items contributed to the Society's proceedings, by Heron.

tant American economists including Earl J. Hamilton and Frank Fetter. He experienced particular kindness from Arthur Cole, the librarian of the Kress Library at Harvard who, knowing that Black was working against time, would pick him up on Saturday and Sunday mornings in his car, drive him to the Kress Library which was not open at weekends, and lock him in for the day.³⁴

Though Black makes light of it in subsequent interviews, the pittance on which he was subsisting made the travelling around to libraries very taxing. Though he went to Chicago, and enjoyed contact with Stigler, Friedman, Frank Knight, Hayek and Hamilton, his first arrival in Chicago was the stuff of nightmares. Travelling thirty-six hours without sleep, as a coach was the cheapest way to travel, he found himself being singled out by Hayek, as chairman of a Ph.D. viva committee, to ask for a comment.³⁵

Despite all the rigours of working on such a tight budget, Black returned with the foundations of his great book *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*. The first public advertisement of the work he was doing was an article in *Oxford Economic Papers* in 1953.³⁶ But it was 1960 before the book itself appeared.

Ireland and policy

As the work on the application of theory to policy in the context of Ireland developed, the classical material, which had formed part of his undergraduate education and been further developed by his work on the Dublin economists, became of central importance. It was then easy for him to get right inside the classical literature on issues like absenteeism of landlords, capital and population, and scale in agriculture. The influence of Jacob Viner complemented this foundation very well, for Viner was not only an expert on classical economics but produced work, in the first instance under the supervision of Taussig, and later in making an important contribution to the literature on customs unions, which was essentially classical.³⁷

³⁴ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁶ 'The classical economists and the Irish Problem', *Oxford Economic Papers*, 5 (1953), 26–40.

³⁷ J. Viner, *Canada's Balance of International Indebtedness. 1900–1913; an Inductive Study in the Theory of International Trade* (Cambridge, MA, 1924); J. Viner, *The Customs Union Issue* (New York, 1950); D. P. O'Brien, 'Customs unions: trade creation and trade diversion in historical perspective', pp. 71–94 in *Methodology, Money and the Firm* (Aldershot, 1994), vol. 2.

On this foundation Black set about producing a work of extraordinary thoroughness and scholarship. It took him virtually ten years, and it was work that would not be possible in an economics department these days—indeed, given the time span, probably in any department. It was a world away from the sort of quick job which has become depressingly familiar in recent times, with quotations taken out of context with the aim of showing how blinkered and intellectually impoverished the classical writers were. Instead Black painstakingly assembled the intellectual structure of the argument, and related it to the institutional setting. He had to deal with the fact that classical preconceptions were also part of the intellectual furniture of those making policy.³⁸ But, against the superficial critics, he was able to show that there was no dogmatic adherence to laissez-faire providing insuperable obstacles to dealing with the problems of Ireland which were in part deep-rooted and cultural—the only large scale industry, as Black noted, was in the Protestant north-east of Ireland which had a different culture but no advantage over the rest of Ireland with respect to access to raw materials.³⁹

Black faced two fundamental questions in dealing with Ireland; how far policy followed directly from theory, and how far policy problems fed back to theory modifications. The answer to neither of these questions was very easy.

The classical economic literature contained implicit assumptions about the institutional background, assumptions which were wholly inappropriate in an Irish context. While the Trinity economist Isaac Butt advocated protection and industrialisation, economists in England—even Robert Torrens, who was of Irish origin and should certainly have known better—advocated things like large-scale capitalist farming,⁴⁰ completely missing the Irish attachment at every level of society to the occupation of land, and the inevitable shortage of sufficient capital. Reasoning in terms of the classical model, writers in England argued for large-scale emigration in order to improve the ratio of capital to population and thus, in terms of the model, to raise wages, treating the population simply as factors of production to be moved.⁴¹

³⁸ Black, 'The classical economists and the Irish Problem', p. 27.

³⁹ See also Black's separate essay on the Harland and Wolff manager William Pirrie in Conor Cruise O'Brien (ed.), *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (London, 1960), pp. 174–84.

⁴⁰ Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, pp. 198–200.

⁴¹ See also Black, 'The classical economists and the Irish Problem', pp. 32–3.

Fundamentally, the prescriptions of the classical economists were based upon the assumed existence of a contract exchange economy. As Black was later to write: 'That such an economy was only very imperfectly established in Ireland, and that landlord-tenant relationships on a pure contract basis were unacceptable to the mass of Irish people, was something of which the classical economists took no account.'⁴²

But that said, there were no easy solutions in Ireland. Agriculture involved at least 75 per cent of the population, outside Ulster, and the fundamental problem was tenure, which did not conform to the English pattern at the most basic level. For while improvements were the responsibility of tenants, they had no security of tenure. In addition there were layers of tenantry, none of them secure, with subletting and subdivision. Eviction, which could occur not because rent had not been paid but because the tenant in the next layer up had not paid, inevitably produced violence. The rapid increase of population placed huge pressure on the system, with rents being bid far above an economic level, and with wages paid in the form of a lease of a patch of land on which to grow potatoes. There was no developed labour market, and no way of absorbing excess labour. Eventually the arrival of famine made government intervention unavoidable, but even then, in the absence of a wholesale and retail trade in food, money paid in public works as part of famine relief could encounter difficulties in purchasing food, so that in the end soup kitchens had to be employed. Pressure on resources was eventually relieved by massive voluntary emigration, but this did not solve the fundamental underlying problem of land tenure. In development terms, Ireland was a labour surplus dual economy, but lacked even the market developments normally to be found in such an economy.

As the classical economists wrestled with this problem, there was undoubtedly the feedback from policy to theory that Black had sought to find. For instance, in the case of the absentee landlords, not only was the basic theory of unilateral international transfers developed and refined but a wide range of subtle qualifications to the theory was developed in the process, including the role of demand transfers and income changes.⁴³ It is true that on the Poor Law the views of the classical economists—with the exception of McCulloch—remained resolutely obscurantist, beginning with opposing all poor relief in Ireland on the grounds of a supposed

⁴²Black, 'The Irish experience in relation to the theory and practice of economic development', in A. J. Youngson (ed.), *Economic Development in the Long Run* (London, 1972), p. 206.

⁴³Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, pp. 72–85.

stimulus to population (something which, it has to be admitted, Ireland hardly needed) and then conceding in some cases the possibility of introducing the English 1834 Poor Law into Ireland, in conditions in which its provisions, based upon 'less eligibility', were completely inapplicable.⁴⁴ But in other respects economists, led by John Stuart Mill, did begin to come to terms with the 'peculiarities' of the Irish situation. As Black noted, 'In the years before the Famine those economists had tended to think that the solution of the question lay in the assimilation of Irish institutions to the English model; after 1847 it was recognised that Irish conditions demanded special treatment.'⁴⁵ Moreover McCulloch in particular, in the style of Adam Smith, recognised the need for institutional reform. It was Ricardo's influence that did the most harm.

There was gradually a recognition that institutional differences did matter, and that it could not be assumed that the world was either like, or should be made like, England. This was in itself an important conclusion of Black's study; qualitative variables were at least as important as quantitative ones.⁴⁶ Institutions did matter. It is a great shame that Black's important work on Ireland is little known except to specialist economists, for it has lessons extending far beyond Ireland. As he pointed out later, mistakes made concerning Ireland were in danger of being repeated in the context of modern development economics and, as the case of India also demonstrated, it is doubtful whether the 'English fallacy' was any better avoided in dealings with India.⁴⁷ Perhaps above all, in a modern context, Black's study provides a salutary warning—or should have done—to those who flew to advise the former Soviet empire, without any recognition of the key role of established (and, in that case, largely absent) property rights for a market economy to function efficiently or even at all.⁴⁸

Leadership in Belfast

Black held the position of lecturer in economics in Queen's from 1946 to 1958. In 1958 he was promoted to a Senior Lectureship and in 1961 to a

⁴⁴ Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, pp. 86–133.

⁴⁵ Black, 'The classical economists and the Irish Problem', p. 36.

⁴⁶ Black, 'The Irish experience', pp. 192, 210.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 209; 'Economic policy in Ireland and India in the time of J. S. Mill', *Economic History Review*, 21 (1968), 321–36.

⁴⁸ I remember Black expressing to me his incredulity at the naivety of such economic 'missionaries'.

Readership. In 1962 he succeeded Stanley Dennison as Professor of Economics, a position that he held until his retirement twenty-three years later. Initially Queen's appointed Black joint head of department, working with the newly appointed Professor of Applied Economics, Jack Parkinson. In contrast to what most of those familiar with academic departments would expect, the two very decent individuals proved that academics can behave like grown-ups. Black's own comment was that the arrangement worked 'efficiently and comfortably'⁴⁹ until Jack Parkinson's departure for Nottingham in 1968. This was more than a conventional piece of diplomacy; even as a junior member of the department, I can testify that the arrangement worked very well. Both as joint head of department and then, from 1968, as the sole head of department, Black is remembered for the meticulous performance of all the duties associated with the education of students,⁵⁰ and for taking particular care over the part-time students, to the quality of which he paid tribute.⁵¹ For Queen's was unusual in offering a part time economics degree with lectures in the evening, and it attracted a large number of good quality students who needed a degree (since in Northern Ireland a teacher training qualification on its own was not fully recognised) and who might have chosen other subjects for a part-time degree, had these been available.

Black did however enjoy one break from his administrative duties at Queen's. In 1963 he received an invitation from William Fellner to teach at Yale for the academic year 1964–5, an invitation which he was delighted to accept. In addition to the academic pleasures, about which he wrote subsequently,⁵² he was able to indulge his love of travel. He purchased a large American car—he always had an interest in cars—which, he wrote to me, was as comfortable as a train. He even managed to overcome the difficulties caused by the disappearance in the transatlantic post of research materials which he had requested to be forwarded from Queen's.

On his return to Queen's, Black was again plunged into administration. He served as Dean of Social Sciences from 1967 to 1970, and as Pro-Vice-Chancellor from 1971 to 1975. There is no doubt that he was an important gravitational force in a situation in which there were particular

⁴⁹Black, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*, p. xxi.

⁵⁰A. E. Murphy and R. Prendergast, 'Professor Robert Denis Collison Black (1922–2008)', *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 16 (2009), 357–60.

⁵¹Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, pp. 97, 100–1.

⁵²Black, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*, pp. xxi–xxii.

local difficulties⁵³ in addition to the general tensions in universities at that time, even though Queen's did not suffer in some ways as badly as, for instance, LSE. As Black himself wrote, 'These were not easy years in any university in Western Europe or the United States but in Queen's they were particularly difficult. It was no easy task to keep the University functioning as a place of learning open to all in a time of growing political unrest.'⁵⁴ In addition there were other difficulties which Black does not mention. When he joined the Department of Economics in 1945, it was still organised along lines normal before 1939, with a professor and one or more assistants. As the Department grew, this continued to be the case. Indeed one of the reasons why the joint headship of Bob Black and Jack Parkinson worked so well may have been that they did not have to cope with the wearying ego-trips to be found in normal academic meetings in a department, for there was no structure incorporating these, so that the Department was run by a benevolent and fair-minded autocracy. But after the departure of Jack Parkinson, Bob Black had to cope with the transition from a benevolent autocracy to that particular form of 'democracy' in which academics like to indulge.

Despite all this, he managed to find the time and energy to initiate in 1968, with Donald Winch, the first of the now annual series of history of economic thought conferences, and the publication of the *History of Economic Thought Newsletter*, which also still continues. In 1971 he was, with Craufurd Goodwin and Bob Coats, one of the driving forces behind the Bellagio conference to mark the hundredth anniversary of the start of the Marginal Revolution.⁵⁵ In addition to that, he was involved in the project to provide a comprehensive record of economists' papers which resulted in the valuable book by Paul Sturges.⁵⁶

Given his commitments, it is remarkable that he managed to find the time and energy to lecture abroad, notably in Italy in 1973 and in Japan, under the auspices of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, in 1980, a visit which also enabled him to have access to some of the marvellous collections of material on the history of economic thought to be

⁵³ 'He acquired a reputation for fairness amongst his colleagues at a time when this virtue was much in requirement in the North of Ireland'—Murphy and Prendergast, 'Professor Robert Denis Collison Black', p. 358.

⁵⁴ Black, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*, p. xxii.

⁵⁵ Black, with A. W. Coats and C. D. Goodwin, *The Marginal Revolution in Economics* (Durham, NC, 1973).

⁵⁶ R. P. Sturges, *Economists' Papers 1750–1950. A Guide to Archive and Other Manuscript Sources for the History of British and Irish Economic Thought* (London, 1975).

found in Japanese libraries. In addition, as a public figure in Northern Ireland, he was necessarily involved in a number of initiatives, notably the Ford Foundation programme, which he pioneered, and which was initially involved in providing money for graduate education in Northern Ireland, while it later gave money to finance research into the causes of conflict in the Province. He was President of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland 1983–6, and chaired commissions of enquiry as well as serving on the Industrial Court for the Province.

Despite all this, Bob Black managed to maintain a remarkable level of research activity, with the help of a full-time research assistant, Jacqueline Wright, who worked with Black from 1969 to 1985. Her role was of particular importance in dealing with the great Jevons project.

William Stanley Jevons and utilitarianism

As the work on Economic Thought and the Irish Question was coming to an end, a series of different factors conspired to steer Black towards work on Jevons. Firstly, Black was anxious to get away from his immersion in classical economics and to broaden his area of research. Secondly, as he told later interviewers, he was afraid of being typecast as an economic historian, rather than as an economist: ‘Jevons was about neoclassical economics and economic theory and so working on him was going back into the main stream of economics which was what I wanted to do at that time.’⁵⁷ A third, and crucial, factor was that Alfred MacLochlainn of the National Library in Dublin showed Black a bundle of letters from Jevons to John Elliot Cairnes. There were other factors which may also have played a part. In particular Black was a strong admirer of Dennis Robertson, so that work on a founding utility theorist would have harmonised with that. In addition, the early work on Longfield gave Black a particular expertise on the background to the Marginal Revolution.

Black’s excitement at seeing the Jevons letters to Cairnes is understandable to anyone who has worked in the field. ‘Crumbs, what are we on to here!’ as he described his reaction to a later interviewer.⁵⁸ But there was an immediate problem; locating and getting access to the other end of the correspondence.⁵⁹ He had letters to Cairnes, but not the letters from

⁵⁷ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, p. 106.

⁵⁹ On this see Black, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*, pp. xx–xxi.

Cairnes. Initial searches at Manchester and University College London, both associated with Jevons, proved fruitless and, when he was finally put in touch with the Jevons family, Black encountered a wall of secrecy, because there was a history of insanity in the family. Jevons's 'Journal', to which Keynes had been denied access when writing his *Essays in Biography*, contained material about this.⁶⁰

The project proceeded along two parallel paths. Firstly, there was the continuing search for material, and the process of obtaining the cooperation of the family. Secondly there was the daunting process of editing the material thus obtained. As Black told his interviewers, 'nobody who gets into this editing game properly would ever do it if they realised just exactly what it might involve'.⁶¹ Editing was 'something which happens to people'. When he wrote about the editing process he recognised, too, that it enjoyed very little professional standing, describing it as 'a type of intellectual activity about which the great majority of modern economists know little and care less',⁶² and he conceded that he would probably not have devoted twenty years to Jevons, had he foreseen what it would entail.⁶³ Editing exhibits, in an extreme form, the problem which dogs work in the history of economic thought more generally—that little of the benefits of such work can be captured as reward by the scholar, so that devotion to scholarship is a prerequisite.

The Jevons project grew, not only because of the discovery of extra correspondence but also because Jevons's granddaughter Rosamond Könekamp, whom it had originally been intended would edit the personal correspondence, became ill, so that Black had to take on the whole job. The project also grew because, as Jevons became more famous and the circle of his acquaintances widened, the difficulties of identifying correspondents, in particular foreign ones, increased. Only a handful of people, those who have edited nineteenth-century letters, can have any idea of the human cost involved in the Jevons edition. This cost extended beyond Black to his family whom he thanked, in terms which are both dignified

⁶⁰ Tribe, *Economics and Economists*, pp. 106–7; Black was no doubt correct, for Keynes's essay on Jevons shows little sign of his having had full access to the Journal. However he does quote from it at one point. See J. M. Keynes *Essays in Biography* (repr. London, 1972), pp. 109–51, at p. 147. Presumably he was directed to the passage by Jevons's son, H. S. Jevons, who was present when Keynes delivered his essay, and proposed a vote of thanks (*ibid.*, pp. 151–4).

⁶¹ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 13.

⁶² Black, 'Editing the papers of W. S. Jevons', in D. E. Moggridge (ed.), *Editing Modern Economists* (New York, 1988), pp. 19–42, at pp. 20, 25.

⁶³ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 13.

and profound, in both the first and the last volumes of the edition.⁶⁴ Those concerned with scholarship in the history of economics should join in this thanks, for without the support of his family it seems inconceivable that this great scholarly enterprise would have been brought to a successful conclusion, as it was.

At least Bob Black felt able to enjoy a secure position at Queen's, though he recognised that the way that academic life was developing made it more and more difficult for academics to get involved in long-term projects like editing. He believed that Jaffé, the editor of Walras's correspondence, never enjoyed tenure at Northwestern University. Indeed he told his interviewers 'Bill Jaffé never had tenure in the proper sense of the word. He had short-term contact after short-term contract, but he pegged on one way and another for more than thirty years.'⁶⁵ In fact this appears to have been a misunderstanding. According to Vincent Tarascio, who was close to Jaffé, the latter had tenure at Northwestern very early on.⁶⁶ But it is easy to understand how morale-sapping considerations of this sort must have been, when engaged upon a huge work like that of Jevons.

Amongst the slings and arrows assailing the editor of correspondence, those representing the belated discovery of extra correspondence must be counted amongst the most painful. Black endured no less than two such episodes. The first was the concealment by Foxwell's elderly daughter of a huge quantity of correspondence which Foxwell had carefully preserved and put in order. It is ironic that the preface to volume I of the Jevons edition should contain thanks to Audrey Foxwell—perhaps indeed the thanks were intended ironically. At all events the correspondence passed into the hands of Richard Freeman on Audrey Foxwell's death.⁶⁷ There is a brief reference in the introduction to volume 4 (1977) of the Jevons edition to Freeman supplying Black with copies of the Jevons letters in the Foxwell

⁶⁴The seven volumes of *The Papers and Correspondence of William Stanley Jevons*, all published by Macmillan for the Royal Economic Society, are: *I* (ed. with Rosamond Könekamp) *Biography and Personal Journal* (1972); *II Correspondence 1850–1862* (1973); *III Correspondence 1863–1872* (1977); *IV Correspondence 1873–1878* (1977); *V Correspondence 1879–1882* (1977); *VI Lectures on Political Economy 1875–1876* (1977); *VII Papers on Political Economy* (1981).

⁶⁵Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 13.

⁶⁶In 1928 Jaffé became an Assistant Professor at Northwestern, and in 1936 he was promoted to Associate Professor *with tenure*. He became a full Professor in 1956. It was only after his retirement that he had a series of short term contracts at York University in Canada, a situation with which he was apparently perfectly happy. See V. J. Tarascio 'William Jaffé, 1898–1980', *History of Political Economy*, 13 (1981), 301–12.

⁶⁷R. D. Freeman, 'The R. D. Freeman collection of Foxwell's papers—its rescue', *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 28 (2006), 489–95.

papers, papers of which Black then understood Freeman to be preparing an edition. The second episode, again involving concealment, was that of Ferdinand Jevons, the nephew of W. S. Jevons. When Black was in the United States in 1964–5, he had approached Ferdinand Jevons about correspondence between W. S. Jevons and his younger brother T. E. Jevons, and been told flatly that there was none. A year after the appearance of the final volume of the edition, Black was informed by Margaret Schabas of the existence of almost one hundred letters exchanged between Jevons and his younger brother. All that Black could do was to publicise a list of the letters and to indicate what had been missed.⁶⁸

The volumes of the Jevons edition when they finally appeared were immediately seen to contain rich material. Volume 1, which appeared in 1972, even contained Jevons's 'Journal', so long concealed from the public and which, like an autobiography, involved very special demands on the editor. Volume 2 appeared in 1973, and at that stage 'only' four volumes were planned. But by the time that volumes 3, 4, 5 and 6 appeared in 1977, it had become a planned seven volume set. This was partly dictated by Macmillan's desire to split planned volumes.⁶⁹ If the four volumes, in addition to volumes 1 and 2, had been the end of the matter, it would still have been a seventeen-year saga. But volume 7 was still to come. It finally appeared in 1981. Since the beginning of the Jevons enterprise can be dated from the discovery of the Jevons letters to Cairnes in 1958, the whole project took an astonishing twenty-three years, a testimony to stamina and to dedication to scholarship which have almost no parallel.

Inevitably, Black became internationally recognised as the authority on Jevons, and in particular on the centrally important elements of Benthamite Utilitarianism in Jevons's thought.⁷⁰ Jevons's *Theory of*

⁶⁸ Black, 'W. S. Jevons's correspondence with T. E. Jevons', *History of Economic Thought Newsletter*, 29 (1982), 1–11; 'The papers and correspondence of W. S. Jevons: a supplementary note', *Manchester School*, 50 (1982), 417–28. Though the article is dignified and without rancour, it is impossible not to sense Black's disappointment at the behaviour of Miss Foxwell (*ibid.*, p. 418). At that time Black was still under the impression that Freeman was preparing an edition of the Foxwell papers. The details of what was missed through the obstruction of Ferdinand Jevons (*ibid.*, pp. 421–7) also allow the reader to sense the unavoidable disappointment.

⁶⁹ At an early stage in the publication process, an episode reminiscent of 1066 *And All That*, in which the student can remember the day and the month but never the year of some historical episode, occurred. Black was told by somebody in the publishers that publication was planned for a particular month—I think it was September. Unfortunately Black later discovered that it was to be September of a different year from that which he had understood to be involved.

⁷⁰ See Black, 'W. S. Jevons', in D. P. O'Brien and J. R. Presley (eds.), *Pioneers of Modern Economics in Britain* (London, 1981), pp. 1–35; Black, 'Bentham and the Political Economists of the Nineteenth Century', *The Bentham Newsletter*, 12 (1988), 24–36; Black, *Economic Theory*

Political Economy was, Black argued, a Benthamite exercise, not a systematic treatise on value and distribution. This in turn explained why Jevons's theory of production was essentially classical, and why he had no theory of aggregate distribution. Indeed, while individual maximisation as a core concept had come from Benthamism, adherence to Utilitarianism had, in Black's view, hampered Jevons's theorising. It was further hampered by his intellectual fertility,⁷¹ and inability to stay long with a particular issue.⁷² Immersion in Jevons's work also led Black to stress that the textbook idea of a Marginal Revolution in the early 1870s, centred around the work of Jevons, Menger and Walras, was seriously misleading. The Marginal Revolution was a process, not an event. So Jevons's *Theory of Political Economy* was simply a stage, albeit an important stage, in the evolution of economic theory.

One of the many interesting things to emerge from the correspondence which Black published was the extent of the interaction between Jevons and that extraordinary pioneer of economics, the Edinburgh engineer Fleeming Jenkin.⁷³ Black's work on Jevons also threw light on the professionalisation of economics. Jevons was one of the first great English economists to be a full-time academic. Volume 6 of Black's edition indeed contained Jevons's lectures, while further material concerning his teaching is contained in volume 7, together with hitherto uncollected papers by Jevons, and material about Jevons's examining.

Though Black paid most attention to Jevons's pioneering work on utility, he rightly stressed other aspects of Jevons's multifaceted career, which themselves stemmed from Jevons's scientific background. This led to systematic collection of data similar to Marshall's famous, but for long

and *Policy in Context*, pp. 163–80 (the first of two Manchester special lectures delivered in 1982); Black, 'W. S. Jevons and the development of marginal utility analysis in British economics', *Schriften des Vereins für Socialpolitik, Studien zur Entwicklung der ökonomischen Theorie*, 9 (1990), 9–18. However, in another paper Black questioned the conventional contrast between Jevons as a thoroughgoing Utilitarian and Marshall who was hardly a Utilitarian at all. He stressed the additional influence on Jevons of Herbert Spencer's blending of Utilitarianism and evolutionary ideas, which also attracted Marshall. See Black 'Jevons, Marshall and the Utilitarian tradition', *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 37 (1990), 5–17.

⁷¹ On Jevons's restlessness, see in particular Black, 'Jevons, marginalism and Manchester', *The Manchester School*, 40 (1972), 1–8.

⁷² Black, 'W. S. Jevons and the foundation of modern economics', *History of Political Economy*, 4 (1972), 364–78; 'Jevons, Bentham and De Morgan', *Economica*, 39 (1972), 119–34; Introduction to W. S. Jevons, *Theory of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth, 1971).

⁷³ The 1868 correspondence with Fleeming Jenkin is in vol. 3 of Black's edition, pp. 166–78. See also J. Creedy, *Edgeworth and the Development of Neoclassical Economics* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 45–6, 61, 74; *Demand and Exchange in Economic Analysis* (Aldershot, 1992), pp. 119–20.

thought lost, Red Book. In particular there was Jevons's astonishing construction of index numbers in investigating the depreciation of gold, which had been rightly hailed earlier by Keynes.⁷⁴ This also led Jevons to his work on trade cycles, culminating in the famous sunspot theory.

Black stressed that Jevons saw himself as a scientist, standing outside debates on policy involving value judgements, a position on which Jevons was fully in accord with Cairnes. Black opposed the idea, which later surfaced in the literature, that the advent of Jevons had signalled much greater enthusiasm for State intervention than had existed previously.⁷⁵ The Greatest Happiness Principle was the key in deciding the limits of *laissez-faire* and, while Jevons did move towards greater intervention, he was influenced by Herbert Spencer in exhibiting a considerable degree of caution in this, and in emphasising the scientific neutrality of economics.

Aggregate demand

Although the work on Jevons was, for the most part, concerned with microeconomic issues—Black recognised that Jevons's monetary theory was almost entirely classical, although given a quantitative turn by Jevons's scientific background⁷⁶—Black's interest in the trade cycle theory of Jevons's contemporary Hyde Clarke had been aroused by finding correspondence between Jevons and Hyde Clarke.

In a paper published in 1992, Black helped to rescue from obscurity the engineer and railway developer Hyde Clarke. Although his name was not unknown to specialists in the history of trade cycle theory, it was Black who interwove the biographical detail with Clarke's economic writings on both railways, especially the economic impact of railway investment, and the trade cycle. His work, together with that of James Henderson, drew attention to Hyde Clarke's theory of the long wave,⁷⁷ which had anticipated, by almost a century, the long wave theory of Kondratieff, though relying on an exogenous cause for the cycle, rather than an endogenous explanation. Drawing on his work on the Jevons edition,⁷⁸ Black

⁷⁴ Keynes, *Essays in Biography*, p. 120.

⁷⁵ Black, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*, pp. 181–201, Manchester special lecture 1982.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 173–80, Manchester special lecture, 1982.

⁷⁷ Black, 'Dr. Kondratieff and Mr. Hyde Clarke', *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*, 9 (1992), 35–58; James P. Henderson 'Astronomy, astrology and business cycles', *ibid.*, 1–34.

⁷⁸ Volume 4, p. 275.

showed that Hyde Clarke had been in contact with important economic writers—J. W. Gilbert, Tooke, and Joplin—and become interested in macroeconomic fluctuations. In this Clarke was, it seems, partly inspired by learning of the pattern of astronomical fluctuations, but he also examined the macroeconomic implications of railway investment, with which he was professionally concerned, and the financial flows involved, with corresponding resource capture. The depth underlying Black's paper demonstrates again the consummate scholarship he deployed in dealing with these issues.

While the work on Jevons led to the work on Hyde Clarke, it was Black's great study of economic thought and Ireland which led him to a keen awareness of the importance of the aggregate demand issue in classical writings. This was developed in a fine essay on 'Parson Malthus, the General and the Captain',⁷⁹ which began with an excellent discussion of the perennial issue of whether, and if so how far, Malthus was a 'Keynesian'. Black showed that what was essentially involved in Malthus's writings on aggregate demand was a capital stock adjustment model derived from Adam Smith, but with two sectors, and with a failure of markets to clear in the short run because of sectoral balance problems. This he felt was to be expected; Malthus and Keynes were reacting against different bodies of established thought: 'Keynes found fault with the Marshallian mode of thought in which he had been trained: Malthus found fault with the Smithian mode of thought in which he had been trained: does it not seem improbable that their thinking would coincide?'⁸⁰

Black then moved on to an examination of two forgotten writers whose work he had first discussed in the book on Ireland.⁸¹ Sleeman was a remarkable individual who had rendered great service in his time in India in connection with the suppression of the Thugs. But in his forgotten economic writings he had, like Malthus, developed a capital stock adjustment model, even though, surprisingly, he was never a pupil at Haileybury where Malthus taught the East India College students.

Pettman, on the other hand, seems to have been more influenced by Lord Lauderdale in emphasising the role of government in maintaining aggregate demand. Since this was likely to encounter difficulties in connection with the maintenance of a fixed exchange rate, and one moreover

⁷⁹ *Economic Journal*, 77 (1967), 59–74. The normally irreproachable Queen's University Library filed an offprint under 'Religion'.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 60.

⁸¹ *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, pp. 162–4.

linked directly to the monetary base, under the gold standard, Pettman followed the Birmingham economists like Thomas Attwood in advocating replacement of the gold standard by an inconvertible paper currency. He also supported the idea of government borrowing to finance expenditure with the aim of activating idle balances. Black categorised him as a Keynesian Attwood.

Methodology

As a result of his work, perhaps especially on the question of economists and Ireland, Black developed deeply thought, yet elusive, views on methodology.⁸² He told his interviewers that, while he was 'a bit of a relativist', he was not a relativist in the full sense of the word because 'relativism in its extreme takes you into a place where you have no anchors at all'.⁸³ At the same time, Black was clear that economics did not make linear progress from error to truth.⁸⁴ Rather, theory moves in cycles, as the rise and fall of Keynesianism demonstrated.⁸⁵ The theory certainly mattered; Black was dismissive of a book which related '*opinions*' on Bank Rate.⁸⁶ But theory and policy needed studying not in a generalised way but in relation to specific historical episodes with policy changes. This was precisely what he had attempted in his study of economists and Ireland.

Economics had to be seen within its historical context, because it was not a hard science. As he told his British Association listeners in 1986, 'In matters of political economy we are rarely, if ever, dealing with propositions which can be treated as valid irrespective of time or place.'⁸⁷ Economists were indeed subject to the dictates of fashion, a topic around which Black built his Inaugural Lecture in 1963,⁸⁸ and which also surfaced in Black's fine essay on Ralph Hawtrey whose career, indeed,

⁸² The thoughtful essay by A. W. Coats, 'R. D. C. Black: an historiographical and methodological analysis', pp. 18–27 in Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, is a testimony to the elusive nature of Black's precise methodological position.

⁸³ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Black, *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*, p. xxviii.

⁸⁵ Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 16.

⁸⁶ *Victorian Studies*, 9 (1965), 60.

⁸⁷ Black, 'Dentists and preachers', Presidential Address to Section F, in *Ideas in Economics* (London, 1988), p. 12.

⁸⁸ Black, *Economic Fashions* (Belfast, 1963). The point about fashions was picked up by Coats, 'R. D. C. Black: an historiographical and methodological analysis', p. 21.

provided a backdrop to changing fashions in macroeconomics. Hawtrey remained resolute in his adherence to his monetary model, as indeed he did, perhaps surprisingly, to the philosophy of G. E. Moore, as Black showed.⁸⁹

Black's concern that theory should not part company with historical circumstances and institutions also surfaced in his essay on the Dublin economists, notably Isaac Butt and J. A. Lawson, and his appreciation of the historical economists Cliffe Leslie and J. K. Ingram, whose work was, he felt, of value in drawing attention to the dangers of artificial abstraction in economics.⁹⁰ In Black's last published article,⁹¹ it was clear that Leslie's unwillingness to accept the high level of generality in the conclusions of orthodox analysis appealed to Black, as did the rejection of 'average', 'natural', 'long run tendencies', 'the absence of disturbing causes', and all the other qualifications which economists employ.

Black was also justifiably concerned at the tendency of modern economists to make up 'facts'—or, as it is politely put, to employ 'stylised facts'. This practice led to the serious danger of policies being applied on the basis of theory built on such 'facts', which could do more harm than good.⁹²

Another aspect of Black's methodological position was that the view of the work of past economists, taken at any point in time, depended upon changing fashions. These fashions could themselves reflect the problems facing economists at the time. Thus, in the post-war years, economists 'discovered' the issue of economic growth per head. This had been a concern of economists from Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill, and beyond, who had set out conditions for growth which were being rediscovered by development economists.⁹³ In surveying the different views of Adam Smith's contribution expressed at different times in history (1826, 1876,

⁸⁹Black, 'Ralph George Hawtrey, 1879–1975', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 63 (1978), 363–97.

⁹⁰Black, 'Economic Studies at Trinity College, Dublin, Part I', *Hermathena*, 70 (1947), 65–80, at 72; 'The present position and prospects of political economy', in A. W. Coats (ed.), *Methodological Controversy in Economics: Historical Essays in Honour of T. W. Hutchison* (Greenwich, CT, 1983), pp. 55–70.

⁹¹'The political economy of Thomas Edward Cliffe Leslie (1826–82): a re-assessment', *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 9 (2002), 17–41.

⁹²In Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, pp. 13–14. Privately, though he was more diplomatic in public, Black thought Friedman's once fashionable claim that the realism of assumptions was of no importance to be 'great nonsense'—letter of 23 Feb. 1991.

⁹³Black, *Economic Fashions*, pp. 7–8.

and 1926), Black was able to bring out the shifts in perspective very well.⁹⁴ At the same time he showed sympathy for the view of Cliffe Leslie that Smith's ideas, formed under the influence of the early stages of industrialisation through which he lived, needed modification to take account of institutional changes since then.

Another factor which stems from *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, but which was a constant theme in Black's writings, was the importance of qualitative data. Quantitatively measurable empirical factors were not the only ones that mattered.⁹⁵ This lesson was very evident from the story of policy in Ireland, as we have already seen. The case of India was, if anything, even stronger: 'Perhaps the lessons of Mill's time may serve as a reminder to economists today, at once more confident of the scientific character of their discipline and more involved in policy-making for underdeveloped areas than ever before, not to forget the relativity of much of economic theory and the value of the historical and comparative approach.'⁹⁶

It was this standpoint which enabled Black to foresee what was likely to happen as economists confidently submitted their blueprints for post-Soviet Eastern Europe. Commenting on economists advising 'emerging countries', he wrote:

When economists from 'advanced' countries are called on to give advice in such cases it is important that they should fully understand the character of the society with which they are asked to deal, and not allow their thinking to be conditioned by the institutional background to which they are accustomed. Here we can learn a lesson from the failures of the classical economists—for, in relation to countries like India, and Ireland, they too often made the mistake of propounding logically impeccable, but practically irrelevant, solutions to development problems. This seems a little like dressing for dinner in the jungle—and that sort of adherence to fashion can make one appear ludicrous.⁹⁷

This was written in 1963, with the Soviet empire still standing. Yet it was a salutary warning, had the confident advisers known of Black's work.

It is not that Black believed naively in some kind of 'political economy'. Indeed, surveying the manifold employments of the term, he found a

⁹⁴ Black, 'Smith's contribution in historical perspective', pp. 42–63 in A. S. Skinner and T. Wilson (eds.), *The Market and the State* (Oxford, 1976).

⁹⁵ In Murphy and Prendergast, *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought*, p. 10; Black, *Economic Fashions*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Black, 'Economic Policy in Ireland and India in the time of J. S. Mill', *Economic History Review*, 21 (1968), 321–36, at 336.

⁹⁷ Black, *Economic Fashions*, p. 10.

bewildering variety of meanings,⁹⁸ none of which really met the essential problem—making sure that the theory fitted the situation to which it was being applied.

In the last resort, it is probably true to say that the methodological position at which Black arrived involved a strong emphasis upon the concept, dating from the work of J. E. Cairnes, whom Black admired, of ‘verification’—essentially making sure that the assumptions on which a theory was built fitted the situation in which it was being applied. But this simple proposition, as Black’s work on Ireland illustrated graphically, was of huge importance in practical terms.

Bibliography

No account of Bob Black’s life and work would be complete without reference to his extraordinary bibliographical activities. This activity, which he called ‘tool making’, was part of his work from his earliest years. While deputising for George Duncan in the years 1943–5, Black constructed a bibliography of economic writings by Trinity economists. This not only provided an important foundation for his first published article but was also published separately.⁹⁹

Behind this enthusiasm probably lay contact with the *London Bibliography of the Social Sciences*¹⁰⁰ and the admonitions of Sidney Webb who, in his introduction to that work, confessed to being ‘commonly reputed to have an infatuation for bibliographies’,¹⁰¹ and continued, ‘For many years I have made it a practice to begin my counsel to would-be researchers—indeed, to everyone wishing to make any genuine investigations—by urging them to start by compiling a list of books, pamphlets, and reports bearing on the chosen subject. The mere survey of their titles, publication dates, and tables of contents is a necessary preliminary to every voyage of discovery after new truth.’ It was indeed Sidney Webb’s example which was quoted to me by Black when, under his supervision, I began work on J. R. McCulloch at Queen’s in 1963.

⁹⁸ Black, ‘Present position and prospects of political economy’.

⁹⁹ ‘A select bibliography of economic writings by members of Trinity College, Dublin’, *Hermathena*, 66 (1945), 55–68.

¹⁰⁰ London, LSE, 1931.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. v.

There is no doubt that Black was fascinated by books. Not only did he have a remarkable collection of his own, but he also studied the holdings in the Queen's University Library of books formerly owned by none other than Adam Smith.¹⁰² Black had also been inspired by his experiences of the great American libraries in his Rockefeller year, especially the great Kress Library.¹⁰³

In addition to this, there was the enormous range of sources on which Black had to draw for *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*. These were to lead to a monumental bibliographical achievement, *A Catalogue of Pamphlets on Economic Subjects Published Between 1750 and 1900 and now Housed in Irish Libraries*.¹⁰⁴ The aim of the Catalogue was to bring to public attention the richness of the Irish libraries, which were often poorly catalogued, and he ended up covering no fewer than seventeen different libraries. In this he had the assistance of the admirable Bill Fuge and the support, again, of the Rockefeller Foundation. The work is an outstanding example of its kind, with painstaking detective work over dates and anonymous authors, and virtually every entry involved some work of that kind. Only those who have undertaken such work can have any idea of what is involved. As Edwin Cannan remarked, 'To discover a reference has often taken hours of labour: to fail to discover one has often taken days.'¹⁰⁵

The *Catalogue* is arranged by year, with an author and title index. Societies and institutions are also indexed. All this was constructed with index cards, before the days of the personal computer. Appropriately, given the all-consuming nature of work of this kind which, it has to be remembered, was proceeding in parallel with the work on Jevons, the *Catalogue* is dedicated to Bob Black's wife Frances.

¹⁰² Black, 'Adam Smith's Library: a note on the volumes at Queen's University, Belfast', *History of Economic Thought Newsletter*, 3 (1969), 20–32.

¹⁰³ Black once confessed to me that the only person's job after which he had secretly yearned was that of Arthur Cole, the Kress Librarian.

¹⁰⁴ Belfast: Queen's University, 1969.

¹⁰⁵ E. Cannan, 'Preface' to Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776, repr. Chicago, 1976), p. xvii.

Conclusion

Bob Black was the well-merited recipient of many honours. In 1974 he was elected both a Fellow of the British Academy and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy. He became an Honorary Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin in 1982, President of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland over the years 1983 to 1986, acted as President of Section F of the British Association in 1984–5, was elected a Distinguished Fellow of the History of Economics Society in 1987, and in 1988 Queen's University bestowed upon him an Hon. D.Sc. Econ. Throughout these years of achievement he owed, as he was the first to recognise, a great debt to his family. Not long after his return from the United States in 1952, he had been introduced to Frances Mary Weatherup, and they married in 1953. Frances was, and is, as far from the *grande dame* wife of a senior academic as it is possible to imagine; not only did junior academics (and perhaps, even more, their wives) find her a breath of fresh air, but she provided the key support as Bob undertook a wide range of duties connected with his position, especially in relation to students and overseas visitors.¹⁰⁶ Their two children have both achieved distinction, in medicine and law respectively, and the tributes which Bob Black paid to his family, notably in the prefaces to the first and last volumes of the Jevons edition, help to underline their own role in his achievements. The list of his writings appended to his *Economic Theory and Policy in Context* of 1995, though incomplete,¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ With some of these, entertaining could be taxing. There was the case of the Icelandic student sitting, as Bob Black said, like an ice block on the sofa. Frances Black asked him conversationally how he liked Belfast. There was a pause; 'Vun lerns to live vid it' came the weary response.

¹⁰⁷ The 65 listed items do not include 'Contribution to symposium on economic development', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 20 Part 2 (1958), 123; the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science paper of 1980 which is mentioned in the text; an obituary of William Jaffé, *History of Economic Thought Newsletter*, 27 (1981), 10–13; the two 1982 Manchester Special Lectures which appeared for the first time in *Economic Theory and Policy in Context*; the autobiographical introduction to that volume, which was later published separately in R. E. Backhouse and R. Middleton (eds.), *Exemplary Economists* (Cheltenham, 2000); the 1995 volume *Economic Theory and Policy in Context* itself; 'Retirement of Denis O'Brien', *History of Economic Thought Newsletter* 60 (1998), 3–5; and Black's final article, 'The political economy of Thomas Edward Cliffe Leslie (1826–82)'. Black told me that he had decided to stop writing at the age of 80. However, due to publication delays, some items appeared after 2002. For Black contributed no fewer than ten entries to H. C. G. Matthews and B. Harrison (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004). They were: Bastable, Charles Francis; Cairnes, John Elliot; Hancock, William Neilson; Hawtrey, Sir Ralph George; Ingram, John Kells; Ingram, Robert Acklom; Jevons, William Stanley; Leslie, Thomas Edward Cliffe; Longfield, Mountifort; and Walsh, Richard Hussey.

records nearly seventy publications, many of them substantial, and provides a fitting final testimony to a life of scholarship and dedication. Bob Black died on 7 December, 2008.

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