



S. G. CHECKLAND

## SYDNEY GEORGE CHECKLAND

1916-1986

SYDNEY CHECKLAND was born in Ottawa on 9 October 1916, the second of three sons born to English parents who had emigrated to Canada shortly before the First World War.

His father, Sydney Tom, grew up in Birmingham where the family had a grocer's shop in Broad Street. The street had recently had trees planted along it in an effort by Joseph Chamberlain to improve the amenities of the town, but the expenditure for this purpose was viewed with strong disapproval by Sydney's grandfather, Edward, because of the resulting increase in rates. Sydney Tom worked as a clerk on the Grand Union Canal until his early thirties when he went off on a kind of pilgrimage to the Holy Land, returning with a precious bottle of water from the river Jordan. He then decided to emigrate and took a job as a *colporteur* on the eastern seaboard of Canada. He also gave occasional lectures and acted as a lay preacher. This may have prepared the way for a further change of career that took him into journalism, a profession in which he continued for the rest of his life.

Sydney's mother, Fanny Selina Savory Mason, was the daughter of a small builder in Bristol. After training as a helper in an orphanage she had gone to Canada and was the matron of a home in Winnipeg when, in her middle thirties, she met Sydney Tom. Their marriage took place in England but they returned at once to Canada, settling in Ottawa shortly before the First World War. Their first son, Edward, was born in 1915, Sydney a year or so later, and a younger brother, Kenneth, in 1922 when Fanny was in her forties. Before Sydney was born his father, although by this time over 35, had volunteered for army service and was fighting in Europe. There he had a difficult time and returned in poor health from which he never fully recovered.

In 1922 Sydney went to Elgin Street School in downtown Ottawa, a form of association with the Elgins that he relished later in life when he came to write their family history. When he left school at the bottom of the depression in 1933 there seemed

little chance that he would ever be able to attend a university or pursue an academic career. He took employment as a ledger clerk with the Bank of Nova Scotia—a respectable but not a well-paid job—and continued to study at night for an associateship of the Canadian Bankers Association, becoming an associate in 1937. This was an achievement of which he was always proud.

He remained with the Bank for over three years but was determined to save enough to go to a university. This could not be done out of the \$200 a year or so that he was earning. He decided, therefore, to move to a higher-paid job as accountant with the Ottawa Sanitary Laundry Company. The Company was chronically illiquid. It had been taken out of liquidation by owners who had no funds of their own but contrived to acquire and instal new machinery and then to delay payment not only for the machinery but of wages to their staff. They looked to their new accountant to accomplish a miraculous transformation of illiquidity into liquidity by ingenious devices such as sending cheques in the wrong envelopes. This experience no doubt deepened his understanding of money and banking but it also allowed him to accumulate the \$500 that he judged he would need for study at a university. It also rid him of any inclination to follow a business career.

In 1938 he set off for Birmingham to take the B.Comm. course under J. G. Smith and Philip Sargent Florence, arriving at the time of the Munich crisis. After his first year, in the summer of 1939, he went for a 3000-mile cycling tour of Europe that took him through Germany at the time of the Hitler rallies and gave him a first-hand view of National Socialism in action. It was an experience that made a lasting impression on him.

At Birmingham he won an exhibition for £30 at the end of his first year. He was also able to supplement his savings by working during vacations as a labourer or for the Unemployment Assistance Board. In 1941 after the usual three years he graduated, winning first class honours. In the meantime, in his final year of study in 1940–1, he had been elected President of the (Birmingham) Guild of Undergraduates. From this he moved on a year later to become after graduation President of the National Union of Students. He was then elected President of the International Union of Students for 1942–3. But before his term of office was up he had volunteered for the army.

In the winter of 1941–2 he began postgraduate research under the direction of Sargent Florence. The subject seems to have had something to do with urban planning—a subject that was to

occupy him later in life. But the research, whatever it was, carried on at Beech Hill, near Reading, proved a false start and was abandoned. It seems that he was advised that the work he had done over the winter could not be incorporated into a Ph.D. thesis because it was being used in a book by somebody else. Why he went to Beech Hill it is impossible to say now. But had he registered for research at, say, Cambridge his life might have followed a different course. As it was, after much heart-searching, he joined the army in the spring of 1942 and went off for six months' training at Sandhurst as a member of the Royal Armoured Corps. It was an eventful year. At Sandhurst he won the belt of honour as the best cadet of his year. In Birmingham he married. His bride was Edith Olive Anthony, a young student of geography whom he had met in the economic history class and who, like Sydney, had graduated at Birmingham the year before.

It was the British Army for which he volunteered, the Canadians being unwilling to take him without proper training. After Sandhurst he was posted to the 5th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment (which had also been Tawney's) and joined them in Otley. This period of his war service, which he greatly enjoyed, was spent entirely in the United Kingdom. Later, he transferred to the Governor General's Foot Guards, a regiment of the Canadian Armoured Brigade, training with them at Bovington and going with them to France after the Normandy landings. In the fighting around Falaise in August 1944 his tank was destroyed and he was severely wounded. The casualties had been heavy, one-third of the officers being killed and another third wounded, so that only a third were able to continue fighting.

Sydney was in hospital for several months in a plaster cast extending from his chest to his toes, with one leg propped up behind him. He was given penicillin injections without which he would have been unlikely to survive. When he left hospital after six months, he was judged to be 40 per cent disabled, walking with crutches, and when they were discarded, with a limp because of the nerve damage he had suffered.

At the end of the war with Germany he stood as a Commonwealth Party candidate for Eccleshall (the 'West end' of Sheffield) in the General Election in July. He had met Sir Richard Acland, the founder and leader of the Party, when he visited Birmingham University to speak at the Union, and Sydney (at that time President) and Olive (Secretary) had both been much impressed (although Olive found him surprisingly 'scruffy' for a baronet). Sydney's campaigning was witnessed by his father who

had come over to cover the election for the Ottawa papers. When the votes were counted the Conservative candidate polled 18,000 and Sydney 14,000, a result that reflected great credit on a candidate for a new party who had never previously contested a Parliamentary election.

A political career had great appeal for Sydney and there was quite a lot of the politician in his make-up. After talking things over with Olive, however, he agreed that, with his disability, it would be too taxing and that he should put the idea behind him. He also came in time to dwell on some of the drawbacks of political life: the half-truths that have to be uttered, the corners that have to be cut. Nevertheless, by the time Sydney started lecturing in Liverpool in October 1946 he had become prospective Labour candidate for Eccleshall; and while in Liverpool he spoke in support of the Labour candidate in Huyton (Harold Wilson). His political ambitions were not easily rooted out. But in the end they were smothered by the pressure of academic duties and interests.

While in hospital, wounded and immobile, his mind had turned again to economics and he began the study of Ricardo's ideas which continued to occupy him when he returned to Birmingham in the spring of 1945. As in much of his later work, he liked to look at ideas in relation to public policy not just in isolation. Ricardo was the subject of his first published article ('The Propagation of Ricardian Economics in England'). But it was not Ricardo but Thomas Attwood whom he elected to study for the M.Comm. degree under W. H. B. Court. The choice of Attwood, an early advocate of a managed currency and a Birmingham man, may have been influenced by Sydney's recollections of his father's talk at home in Ottawa of Birmingham and its history. The M.Comm. was completed in a year and remained unpublished, although drawn upon for an article on 'The Birmingham Economists, 1815-1850' in 1948.

Meanwhile Sydney had been appointed to a lecturing post in Liverpool in the spring of 1946. He went over to Canada in the summer to visit his parents, his first visit since 1939, and took up his appointment on his return. He remained in Liverpool for seven years, first as an assistant lecturer in economics on a one-year appointment and then as a lecturer (1948) and senior lecturer (1949). It was an exciting time, with ex-service men students more or less of the same age as their teachers and a growing staff under G. C. Allen and P. Barrett Whale. To begin with, Sydney kept in touch with Birmingham, but Liverpool had

its own interest for the historian of ideas and it was not long before he was digging into the records of Liverpool merchants and business men. Between 1948 and 1954 he published a dozen articles, several on the ideas of economists from Ricardo to Jevons, one that heralded his interest in urban history ('English Provincial Cities') and two on Liverpool merchants (of which his 'John Gladstone as Trader and Planter' was the forerunner of a full-scale biography many years later). His articles won him a Ph.D. of the University and attracted much attention elsewhere. They also brought him into touch at an early stage in his career with two scholars for whom he had a particular admiration and who played an important part in his life—Michael Postan and Jacob Viner.

It was Postan who pressed him to move to Cambridge and accept a university lectureship in economic history, then a rather neglected subject there. For an economist to be offered such an appointment, although it was common enough later, was very rare in those days. The appointment was in the History Faculty and was accompanied by membership of Magdalene College and a lectureship at Trinity but not unfortunately by a Fellowship. The move allowed Sydney to pursue his interest in the development of economic thought and established him as an economic historian. He was already working on urban and business history. Now he started work on a book that united these interests, *The Rise of Industrial Society*, but it was to be many years before it appeared. Apart from this, the work he produced for publication in his years at Cambridge included his classical essay on 'The Mind of the City 1870-1914' (never reprinted) and three articles on West Indian trade in the Napoleonic wars.

After three years in Cambridge he moved again, this time to the newly created chair in economic history in the University of Glasgow. Here he found fulfilment. The atmosphere was congenial, the scope almost unlimited. The various departments of social and economic studies in the University (including the Departments of Economic History, Political Economy, Town Planning, Social and Economic Research and International Studies) worked together harmoniously and in close propinquity. There was easy access also to specialists in geography, art and design, science and technology; the prefaces to Sydney's books record his obligations to a long list of colleagues in these and other departments.

There was a common interest in urban development and in the problems of modern business in an urban setting. The changes

currently at work in Glasgow were themselves a challenge to the social scientist to adopt an historical perspective and view the transformation then in progress in the light of the rise and decline of the city over the past two centuries. There was the prospect of learning by doing: acting in association with Scottish businesses (including the banks) and with public bodies in the area (for example, the East Kilbride Development Corporation of which he was a member from 1964–8). The influence of the Glasgow environment in which he worked is evident in Sydney's writings and activities throughout the twenty-five years of his life there.

His first task was to create a new department. This he did with the utmost energy, relying heavily on Roy Campbell for help in getting the department on its feet. When Sydney arrived there was a single lecturer in economic history who had been there since the 1920s. Within a year, several more lecturers had been recruited and a teaching programme arranged, leading to an honours degree in economic history either singly or in combination with economics, history, or geography. It is the custom in Glasgow for the Professor to lecture to the first year (ordinary) class and Sydney willingly adopted it, offering a course that was anything but narrow. As the years went by, the focus widened steadily from Great Britain to a view of world economic development, taking in Africa as well as Asia, China as well as Russia. To give it a good start, the Professor of Geography, Ronald Miller, marched a troop of his young geographers into the first course in 1957.

Although Sydney protested to his friends 'I'm not formidable', he seemed so to his students. As Professor Slaven recalls:

He was only 41, tall and grave, and seemed older to teenage students. His mellifluous voice enchanted the ladies, and his astonishing vocabulary sent us all scurrying to consult the *Shorter English Dictionary* (the *Concise* couldn't cope) to decipher the Checkland rhetoric. Irreverently there was a daily competition to count the words no one could understand.

Within a short time of his appointment Sydney was joined in Glasgow by two newly appointed professors, Tom Wilson and Alec Nove. Donald Robertson and I were already on the staff. This group formed one of the most active centres of growth in the University and was brought closer together by the erection of the Adam Smith Building in which all were housed (though by

that time I had myself departed). They collaborated, then and later, across departmental boundaries with other departments such as geography and eventually formed a sub-faculty within the Faculty of Arts. Of this, Sydney acted as Chairman until he decided, without carrying all his colleagues with him, to take the lead in breaking away from the Faculty of Arts and calling into existence in 1976 a separate Faculty of Social Sciences. Meanwhile his own department grew steadily. By the time he retired in 1982 the one lecturer he inherited had developed into a staff of fourteen including two professors, a reader, a senior lecturer, seven lecturers, and three research staff.

Sydney played his part in the life of the University in many different ways. He was a key figure in the University Court as a Senate representative in the four turbulent years 1970–3. For most of that time he was Chairman of a Joint Council of Staff and Students and he served also on the Finance Committee. He was not the man to take his duties lightly. At one point he issued a kind of manifesto setting out his view of how the University should be run—he wanted a closer association with the community—and was disappointed that little seemed to come of it. It was, however, his initiative that led to the radical change under which professors were no longer automatically heads of departments, and a system of appointed heads was substituted. I can testify, too, to his skill as an election agent in the contest in 1972 between candidates for the Chancellorship.

One so active in university politics could hardly escape being caught, in the rebellious years around 1970, in the battles between generations and ideologies. As Professor Slaven recalls, he was apt to bemoan that while the Faculty of Social Sciences branded him as a ‘pinko’, and to the University Court he seemed a wild radical, young faculty members often regarded his views as ‘somewhere to the right of Genghis Khan’.

Another activity was provision for the study of business history. Almost as soon as he arrived he set about raising funds with the help of the Junior Chamber of Commerce (and particularly its President, Ralph Hillis) for a lectureship (later elevated into a chair) in business history. This was named after Patrick Colquhoun, one of the earliest Scottish statisticians, and was the first academic appointment of its kind in the United Kingdom. Peter Payne, now Professor in Aberdeen, who was appointed to the lectureship, was a staunch ally of Sydney’s in setting on foot schemes for the collection within the University of business records and the subsequent establishment of the Business



Archives Council of Scotland. Lorries were sent out, with members of the staff in boiler suits, to collect records from businesses that had been taken over or failed or simply needed the space. The records were stored on the ground floor of the Adam Smith Building, where Roy Campbell in helping to plan the building had had the foresight to plan for such a contingency. Sydney's interest in business records was inexhaustible. He developed strong links with the Scottish Record Office, and gave full support to the Scottish Records Advisory Council and the National Register of Archives (Scotland), of which he became Chairman in 1971. One of his last activities was to join in the editing of the *Dictionary of Scottish Business Biography*, the first volume of which appeared after his death with several contributions from him.

Sydney also played his part in the advancement of his discipline outside the University. From 1958 he was a member of the Council of the Economic History Society and its President from 1977 to 1980. He served on various committees of the SSRC/ESRC: as a member of the Economic and Social History Committee from 1970-2 and again from 1979-82; as chairman of the Industry and Employment Committee in 1982-4; and as a full member of Council in 1979-84. In recognition of his distinction as an economic historian he was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1977. A little later he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh; and in 1984 the Scottish economic historians, in founding the Scottish Economic and Social History Society, elected him Honorary President. These distinctions gave him much pleasure.

Sydney was fond of travelling and visiting other countries. He and his family camped all over Europe and in North America. He had two spells at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies, both of them arranged by Viner, and by making use of his summer vacation he was able to extend the length of the visits. As the preface to his *The Rise of Industrial Society* makes clear, he used them to good purpose, working on his first book in the term's leave he took in 1960 and on his second (*The Mines of Tharsis*) in 1964. He spent the summer vacation in 1980 in Australia at ANU and Monash and was Distinguished Visiting Professor at Edmonton, Alberta (where one of his brothers was on the staff), in 1983.

He made four visits to Japan, two of them with Olive. The first was to a conference in 1966 with a group of town planners from East Kilbride Development Corporation, of which he was then a member. In January 1975 he went back on the invitation of the

Japanese to address the second Fuji Conference, the second British speaker to be so invited. He lectured also on business history and on 'gentlemanship'. In September 1981 he spent a month in Japan with Olive as a British Academy Visiting Professor and was deeply impressed by the thoughtful arrangements made by his hosts, their generous hospitality, and the warmth of their reception. His last visit was in the autumn of 1984 when he and Olive were both visiting professors at Keiō University and lectured in alternate weeks. Sydney was also invited to deliver the Keynote address at the twenty-fifth anniversary at Chūō University of the founding of the Business History Society of Japan, an address which Chūō published in Japanese and Keiō in English.

It was hard work, especially as they set themselves to bridge the gap between professors and students, inviting the research students to a restaurant meal and trying to get them to engage in discussion. This proved easier when the professors were not present. Olive also pursued her own research into the linkages between the British and Japanese shipbuilding industries over the past century and the part played by Glasgow engineers in the founding of Tokyo University.

Sydney's first book, *The Rise of Industrial Society in England 1815–1885*, was a long time in the writing and did not appear until 1964 when he was 48. It had begun in Cambridge under the influence of Postan and taken shape in Princeton in 1960. It was a thoughtful and unconventional history, more concerned with the development of ideas and with the role of the various groups who made up the Victorian economy than with the twists and turns of events over the period, although there is a sketch of the changes over the period in the opening chapter. The book is sparing in its use of statistics and has no tables or graphs, not from lack of familiarity with the main sources, but because Sydney preferred to work what figures seemed to him illuminating into the argument of the text.

It was followed by a rapid succession of studies on a wide variety of subjects. First came *The Mines of Tharsis: Roman, French and British Enterprise in Spain*, a history of the Tharsis Sulphur and Copper Company which appeared in 1967. The Company was a Glasgow one formed in the 1860s by Sir Charles Tennant to take over a pyrites mine in the south of Spain that went back to Roman times. Under Tennant, it became the most profitable copper mine in the world and played a part both in the introduction of large-scale steel production in Scotland and in

the development of the cyanide process of gold extraction. It was a difficult history to write, both because of the demands it made on scientific knowledge and because there was no available economic history of Spain in English. It succeeded as a case-study in the rise and decline of a multi-national business and is particularly interesting for the portraits it paints of the key figures in the business, especially Sir Charles Tennant.

It was a book that might easily have led on to a biography of Sir Charles. Instead, it was the Gladstone family that formed the subject of the next book, *The Gladstones: a Family Biography, 1764–1851* published in 1971. It was a subject that had been at the back of his mind for some time, indeed since his work on Liverpool merchants nearly twenty years before. His own family was growing up at the time and this may have had its influence on his choice of theme. It was a book that gave him particular pleasure and won public appreciation (including the Scottish Arts Council Book Award).

What was perhaps his most ambitious book, *Scottish Banking: a History, 1695–1973* followed in 1975 and won him the Saltire Society prize. It was begun on the heels of *The Gladstones* after persuasion by Frank Taylor, Secretary of the Institute of Bankers in Scotland, who continued to provide help and offer exceptionally perceptive comments as the book took shape. The subject had a double appeal as business history ('the story of well over a hundred enterprises') and as a study of banking, where Sydney had begun forty years before. It was a mammoth enterprise, given the massive source material that had to be digested and the many interviews that were necessary. The result was a highly readable account of the evolution of the Scottish banks that did full justice to the many practices in which the Scots were pioneers.

In the mid-1970s Sydney took an active part in the Adam Smith bicentenary celebrations, especially in the preparation of the Glasgow edition of Smith's works and correspondence, making many useful suggestions and contributing an essay on 'Adam Smith and the Bankers'. He was also busy again on urban problems, choosing—what more natural?—Glasgow as a subject. The book he produced in 1976 (and subsequently enlarged for a new edition in 1982) was given the intriguing title of *The Upas Tree*. This was intended to symbolize the widespread effect of the collapse of the heavy industries which had for so long dominated the Glasgow scene, the Upas tree being a fabulous Javanese tree spreading poison and destruction for miles around.

There was then a longish interval before the appearance of *British Public Policy 1776–1939* in 1982, just after his retirement, followed by *Industry and Ethos: Scotland, 1832–1914* in 1984. *The Elgins: a Tale of Aristocrats and Proconsuls*, his last work, was barely complete at his death.

One feature of all Sydney's writings is his liking for the long sweep of history. Nearly all his books cover at least seventy years and some of them much longer. He preferred a long perspective to immersion in detail although sometimes, as with *Scottish Banking*, the detail was indispensable if the perspective was to be correct. The themes he chose tend also to be on the grand scale whether they relate to business history, banking, or urban growth. His biographies become family histories; his work on banking spans a hundred businesses; when he turns to government policy it is to outline the whole range of social and economic legislation for a century and a half.

Sydney had a happy home life, with a wife whose personality matched his, with perhaps a little extra thrust. They had five children, two sons and three daughters, who were still growing up when the Checklands arrived in Glasgow, and the family liked nothing better than to go off on excursions or spend a weekend at their cottage in Fife. Between Sydney and Olive there was a true partnership. She shared his interests and gave him strength and encouragement. She supported and in due course collaborated with him, reading and commenting on his writings, making suggestions, bringing to bear her own perceptive judgment, and latterly helping with editing and drafting. She had also a protective role, watching for early symptoms of fatigue, helping him to keep his commitments within bounds and relieving him of duties that could be delegated to her.

From the early seventies Olive took an increasing share in Sydney's work. They joined forces in editing *The Poor Law Report of 1834* which appeared in 1973 and were joint authors of the volume on *Industry and Ethos: Scotland, 1832–1914* published in 1984. She not only helped with *The Elgins* but after Sydney's death was left to revise the manuscript and prepare it for publication.

Their home was always open to friends and students. After the Hungarian rising in 1956 they gave shelter to several students from Hungary and continued to interest themselves in their future careers. Honours and graduate students were regularly entertained, mixing with staff at lunches, dinners, and parties where they might be asked to join in performances of song or

dance or games that were often of Sydney's devising. In such an atmosphere they were less likely to find him aloof and reserved as he sometimes appeared to them and he could break through a kind of shyness. As Professor Slaven, one of his early Glasgow pupils, puts it, 'when combined with his total absorption in his work this shyness could appear as remoteness and, in spite of his social skill, younger colleagues and students were seldom entirely at ease in his presence.' Mark Elvin recalls that, after having the Checklands to dinner along with other colleagues, a fellow-member of the staff of the Department approached him to ask on behalf of the other members not to call him 'Sydney' to his face again in their presence, since *they* felt obliged to call him 'Professor Checkland'. But as host he could dispense with formality and display aspects of his personality unsuspected by his students, while Olive as hostess drilled them assiduously in social mixing.

However he may have appeared to his students, Sydney had a warm and attractive personality, combining wit, elegance, and a relaxed good humour. He had a scholar's intellectual honesty and candour. He enlivened discussion with his suggestions but was never over-bearing. He was always preoccupied with his current research and it was to that his mind turned whenever he talked to colleagues. One of his conversational gifts was to puncture an extravagant thesis by going one better so as to dissolve it in absurdity. 'You don't mean', he would begin, and present a caricature of what had been said so compelling that it had to be unsaid at once.

For over twenty years he painted as a recreation, usually in oils, generally on holiday when he was not writing and had the emotional energy to spare for it. The family would gather round to comment and offer encouragement, with an occasional 'Slosh it on Dad' from an iconoclastic daughter as he concentrated on perfecting some tiny corner of the canvas.

He was a man of many attachments. For twenty-five years he lived and breathed Glasgow, absorbed by the city and its history. At weekends and vacations he transferred his affections eastwards to his cottage in Fife where he engaged in a fresh mixture of work and recreation. From Liverpool and Cambridge he continued to draw intellectual nourishment. Further away, he felt each spring the pull of Canada, the country of his birth. All these elements were mixed in him to produce responses that enriched his writing and quickened his imagination.

It was to Cambridge, for which he retained a special affection,

that he returned on retirement in 1982. It was a highly productive retirement in the course of which he produced with Olive his *Industry and Ethos: Scotland, 1832-1914*, and had just completed his book on *The Elgins* before his death. In the autumn of 1985 he and Olive spent six happy weeks at Bellagio on Lake Como, working on the Elgins manuscript. Then in February he had a stroke and in just over a month, on 22 March, he was dead.

ALEC CAIRNCROSS

In preparing this memoir of Sydney Checkland I have been greatly helped by his widow, Mrs Olive Checkland, and have drawn heavily on earlier obituaries by Peter Payne and Anthony Slaven. I have also had the benefit of comments from Mark Elvin and Tom Wilson.