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Economic History in Oxford: A Centennial Celebration

Introductory remarks to the 100th Oxford discussion paper in economic history

by N.H. Dimsdale and L. Arena

The appearance of the 100th Discussion Paper in Economic History is a milestone, which provides a good opportunity to review the recent progress of the subject in Oxford. This note is primarily concerned with the evolution of the MSc in Social and Economic history and it seeks to place this in the broader context of the development of economic history in Oxford. Although the chair in Economic History was first introduced in 1931, its first two holders, George Norman Clark (who was Chair until 1943) and William Keith Hancock (who held the Chair between 1944 and 1949) followed a very historical approach and did not produce any distinguished students in the field. Then, we start this brief survey with the appointment of Hrothgar John Habakkuk, who did so much to advance the standing of the subject during his time as Chichele Professor. He was elected to the Chair in 1950 and kept this position until 1967. He devoted much energy to the supervision of a small group of graduate students, who produced some distinguished DPhil theses¹ and who later became prominent and inspiring figures in the field. Several leading economic historians were students of Habakkuk, including Ian Byatt², Roderick Floud³, Patrick O'Brien⁴, Garry Hawke⁵ and Nick von Tunzelmann⁶ to mention a few examples. While Habakkuk was an outstanding economic historian with strong theoretical leanings, Oxford also had the services of Prof. Asa Briggs who was a leading social historian⁷. Asa Briggs contributed to the growing reputation of the University in the rapidly expanding area of social history.

While Habakkuk concentrated on supervision of a handful of graduates, the teaching of PPE students was in the hands of the charismatic Australian Max Hartwell⁸. Although he was a traditional economic historian, Max was an enthusiast for New Economic History or Cliometrics. He did much to encourage work in this area and introduced the first PPE course in “quantitative economic history” in Hilary term 1968 which he taught with Prof. Matthews, Prof. Abramovitz and Prof. P. David. One of his most

¹ Between 1950 and 1972, Habakkuk supervised not less than 19 D.Phil. students (*Oxford University Gazette*).

² I.C.R. Byatt wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Social Studies between 1955 and 1962 on “The British Electricity Industry, 1875-1914”.

³ R.C. Floud wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Modern History between 1964 and 1970 on “The metal-working machine tool industry in England (1850-1914), with special reference to Greenwood and Battay Ltd.”.

⁴ P.K. O'Brien wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Social Studies between 1957 and 1966 on “Government revenue, 1793-1815: A study of fiscal and financial policy in the war against France”.

⁵ G.R. Hawke wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Social Studies between 1965 and 1969 on “The effects of the railways on the growth of the economy of England and Wales 1840-70”.

⁶ G.N. von Tunzelmann wrote his D.Phil. thesis in the Faculty of Social Studies between 1967 and 1970 on “Economic aspects of the introduction of steam power in Britain up to 1850 with special reference to textile industries”. First supervised by Prof. Habakkuk, he then switched to Prof. Mathias in TT 1969.

⁷ After an education in Economics, Asa Briggs worked at Bletchley Park from 1942 to 1945 to serve the Intelligence Corps during WWII. In 1945, he became a Fellow of Worcester College (until 1955) before being appointed University Lecturer in Recent Social and Economic History (1950-1955). During his two last years at Oxford, he was also a Fellow of Nuffield College. He then moved to the University of Leeds.

⁸ R.M. Hartwell started teaching British Economic History (1830-1873) in Trinity Term 1957 (*Oxford University Gazette*).

prominent students was Mark Thomas who became Professor at the University of Virginia. He also secured the appointment of Nick Crafts to a Fellowship in Economics at University College, in 1977. Nick was to inject more economic reasoning into the teaching of economic history. He also encouraged economists such as Nicholas Dimsdale to take a closer interest in economic history. One of his most outstanding graduate students was Steve Broadberry, who was to have a distinguished career in quantitative economic history.

When Habakkuk was elected to become Master of Jesus College he gave up the Chichele chair in 1967 and was succeeded by Peter Matthias in 1969. He worked hard to promote the cause of economic history among both economists and historians. His main achievement was the introduction of the Joint Degree of History and Economics, which attracted some able students to economic history, including Tim Leunig. Patrick O'Brien was an enthusiastic teacher on this course, which remained relatively small in size, but high in academic quality. There were however some problems in fitting the Joint School into the Collegiate structure of Oxford, despite the strong demand for the course from students.

Economic history in Oxford was transformed by the appointment of Charles Feinstein to the Chichele Chair in 1989 which he kept until 1999. He was then Professor of Economic History at the University of York, where he taught social and economic history. He had made a major contribution to the national income accounts of the UK. This provided the statistical basis for the work which he and Matthews did on British economic growth⁹. His work enabled the course of the economy to be analysed since the mid-19th century. At York he had designed courses which combined both economic and social history. His interest in social history was encouraged by his wife Anne Digby, who is a noted social historian.

Feinstein planned to transform the teaching of economic history in Oxford by setting up a graduate course which became known as the MSc in Economic and Social History. It was to be a one year taught course, which provided ready access to the existing D.Phil. in Economic History. Initially a proposal for introducing a taught graduate course in economic history was put forward by Nick Crafts. It was this idea which was developed and realized by Charles Feinstein. The original MSc included not only economic and social history, but also demography and medical history, which came under the Wellcome Foundation. This arrangement worked well for about ten years, as explained by Prof. Richard Smith. It was then decided that the course in Economic and Social History should be independent.

Charles Feinstein built up a team of academics who would realize his plans for the course. A key figure was Avner Offer, who had worked with Charles at York. Avner was appointed as Reader in Economic History and later succeeded Charles as Chichele Professor when he vacated the Chair in 1999. He did much of the detailed planning of the MSc. course, while the ESRC made a useful contribution by requiring as a condition for funding that students take a basic course in quantitative methods. This paper formed part of the introduction to the course, which provided a common basis for students from a broad range of backgrounds.

As explained by Avner, Charles sought to attract able students with a wide range of interests. He did not want to impose pre-requisites, such as the previous study of economics at the undergraduate level. When there were problems over arranging teaching for the course on Quantitative Methods, he undertook to do it

⁹ Matthews R.C.O., Feinstein C.H., Odling-Smee J.C., (1982), *British Economic Growth: 1856-1973*, Stanford University Press.

himself. His devotion to economic history and to the students on the course was an inspiration to those worked with him. His own broad approach to economic history enabled him to work effectively with demographers and medical historians, as explained by Richard Smith.

Charles attracted some excellent economic historians, such as James Foreman Peck, and he asked Nicholas Dimsdale to design and teach a paper on British Macroeconomic history. When Charles retired, he was succeeded by Avner Offer in 2000, who continued to encourage students with a wide ranging approach to economic history and a strong personal motivation. The History Faculty was fortunate in attracting Jane Humphries to All Souls, who was encouraged by Charles Feinstein to apply to the Chichele readership. Charles was her undergraduate teacher in Cambridge and they kept contact since then. She has made an important contribution to the course, which also benefited from the lively contributions of Paul David of Oxford and Stanford to seminars and to the supervision of graduate students.

Meanwhile the Economics Department under the leadership of David Hendry decided to put greater emphasis on the teaching and research in economic history. With Hendry's support, Bob Allen and Knick Harley were appointed to the Department. These appointments did much to strengthen the contribution of economists to the MSc. With such strength in teaching and research and combined with a well designed programme, the course was able to attract students of high quality from a wide range of countries. Among the outstanding students were Tim Leunig of LSE and Joachim Voth. Both of whom have commented on the their experience with economic history in Oxford. Other students who wrote DPhil theses of distinction were Ed Butchart, Steven Nicholas and Liam Brunt to mention a few names, but there were many more.

The high level of research activity has generated an impressive collection of essays which have appeared as Discussion Papers in Economic History. Most of the papers in the collection have been written by students or members of the faculty, while some have been written by visiting academics. The Discussion Papers give a good indication of the scope of work in economic history being done in Oxford.