

Preserving the Economic Memory

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THIRTY YEARS AGO, when the small tribe of historians of economics in this country was making the first self-conscious moves to organize itself into some kind of community, a group of us obtained funds from the RES and what was then called the Social Sciences Research Council to carry out research on the location of British and Irish economists' papers.¹ The results were published in 1975 as *Economists' papers 1750-1950; a guide to archive and other manuscript sources for the history of British and Irish economic thought*. The funds had enabled the steering committee to employ Paul Sturges, then a junior archivist, now a professor of library sciences at Loughborough University, for a period of three years to inquire into the existence and verify the location of papers. The guide he compiled included findings for over one hundred economists during the crucial period that saw economics grow from a field of intense amateur cultivation into an international professional pursuit.

At that time our modest but effectively formulated proposal probably put economists ahead of the game, among social scientists at least. Since then, however, we have fallen behind what is happening in some comparable academic and professional groupings. It is not surprising to find that a guide to the papers of British antiquaries and historians published in 2003 managed to list the papers of thirteen hundred individuals stretching over five and a half centuries.² What else would be expected of an occupation with ancient roots and a direct concern with preserving manuscripts? A more telling comparison can be made with what has happened in the natural sciences, where a National Cataloguing Unit for the Archives of Contemporary Scientists, now located at the University of Bath, has existed for over thirty years and has so far catalogued two hundred and twenty archives for British scientists in forty-nine institutions and university repositories. Economics would not be lagging if it could boast of a unit with a mission similar to that of NCUACS: 'to locate, catalogue and find permanent homes for the archives of contemporary British scientists and engineers, and thus preserve and make accessible the

original source materials for the history of science'. It might be too much to hope for sufficient funds to maintain a permanent unit capable of cataloguing economists' papers as they become available, but it should not be beyond our wit to organize something close to the remainder of that brief.

The title of this article echoes a reference on one the NCUACS web pages to the 'chemical memory'. I would hope that readers of this newsletter would agree that preserving the memory embodied in the papers of economists is no less significant than doing the same for chemists. As our North American compeers have complained, however: 'It is curious indeed that while economists are tremendously concerned with data and inferences made from data, historical records like those found in archives are one type of data which economists systematically ignore.'³ Economists have also been accused

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of suffering from a condition that could be described politely as truncated memory, and less politely, in Lionel Robbins's words as 'provincialism in time'. In addition to catching up we may have some learning to do, and the best place to begin the former is by extending the coverage

of our original guide to the end of the twentieth century in a manner that befits a digital age.

With a start-up grant from the RES the existing guide has now been digitised by Azhar Hussain and will be made freely available via a website designed by him (www.economistspapers.org.uk) that will also serve as an address for exchanging information about economists' papers held in archives or still in private hands. I would not have felt able to propose this project without first ensuring that I had the support and collaboration of Susan Howson and Donald Moggridge, much of whose individual and joint research has centred on the policy-making impact of British economists during the twentieth century.⁴ Using defensible, though what must ultimately be subjective, criteria, we have compiled a working list of 'A' and 'B' figures who were active during the period 1950–2000, and around whom we aim to construct

entries on the pattern used in the existing guide. We also need to gather information about the location of papers for the names listed in the original guide, adding names and sources where new information is now available.

In compiling our lists, apart from any knowledge we bring to the period, we have used two major electronic sources: the indispensable *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* that became available in 2004, and the listings for 'economist' given on the website maintained by the National Register of Archives. Searching for those who described themselves, or have subsequently been described, as economists yields a long list of potential candidates. The ODNB-derived list contains nearly five hundred names in this category, and the NRA list just under three hundred. The ODNB entries provide some information on archive sources that can be crosschecked with the fuller listings given by the NRA; and there are now many websites giving access to descriptions of the contents of various archives here and abroad.⁵

Internet resources enable us to collect, store, and disseminate large amounts of information *once it enters the public domain and has been assessed, described, and catalogued*. But the second half of that sentence defines the problem we face. We have first to convince economists and those who survive them that their papers may merit preservation, wholly or partially; and that it is worth devoting thought, time, and money to the business of preparing papers for public access, with or without restrictions. This is where the relative unfamiliarity of economists with archival material threatens to become a liability. If there is little evidence of general interest or use on the part of the relevant community, economists' papers will be crowded out in the competition for archivists' attention. Like the rest of us, archivists thrive on the interest shown in their work: if we do not value the unpublished papers of economists, why should they?

Most universities and many other institutions, governmental, inter-governmental, and commercial, where economists ply their trade, are capable of appreciating the value of special collections of documents and other artefacts that instantiate their existence. The papers of Sir Alec Cairncross, who combined the careers of academic and civil servant for most of his life, are scattered between Glasgow, Oxford, LSE, the Treasury, and the World Bank, among other places. In the case of high-profile figures some collections have considerable commercial value, thereby creating a problem if the trustees of estates decide to maximize return by sale abroad in piecemeal fashion to individuals or institutions that are unable or unwilling to grant access to scholars on terms equivalent to those that would have applied in this country. Large parts of the papers of Sir Roy Harrod and Sir John Hicks have ended up in Japanese libraries, though this has not prevented publication of an edition of

Harrod's inter-war papers.⁶ Uncovering the fate of Hicks's papers will be an early objective of our project, one that will have to be pursued in Japan as well as in this country. The story with the happiest ending so far concerns a collection of Malthus papers that was acquired by Kanto Gakuen University in 1991 for a sum close to £1million. In addition to housing the collection in style, the university financed expert editing, with the result that it is now available in hard print to the world at large.⁷

Indeed, the entire situation may be healthier than the impression I have given so far. An important step of national significance was taken in 1979 when the RES began to entrust its records, along with the editorial proceedings of the *Economic Journal*, to the care of the Archive Department of the British Library of Political and Economic Science, supplementing this with a grant to assist the sorting and cataloguing process. Whether as officers, authors, or editors, this large and growing collection means that a number of economists gain entry to the NRA listings on this ground alone. Other universities that have been the home of prominent mid- and late-twentieth-century economists have also begun to assemble well-catalogued collections of papers. This is clear in the case of Cambridge, where the manuscript holdings of the university library (J N Keynes), the Marshall Library (Alfred Marshall), and the modern archives maintained by Churchill College (R G Hawtrey), Trinity College (D H Robertson and Piero Sraffa), and King's College (Richard Kahn, Nicholas Kaldor, J M Keynes, and Joan Robinson) have already given rise to valuable published research on the history of economics.⁸ When Susan Howson wrote on this subject in these pages nine years ago, she was able to give an illustrative list of archives for just under sixty prominent twentieth-century economists.⁹

Exploring the contents of such archives and supplementing them with collections of the papers of economists whose careers are perhaps more representative of the profession at large, as it is now practised within and beyond the glass walls of academia in financial and industrial institutions, in government departments, and in journalism and the public media, is the next important step. Economists whose published writings may only suggest a 'B' rating as a means of indicating their impact on the fundamental shape of the discipline and its many specialised branches may have occupied a central role in moulding the profile of the profession in other respects. The survival of students' lecture notes has played a major part in the reconstruction of Adam Smith's intellectual enterprise and in our understanding of the development of Keynes's thinking. A lively, controversial, and incorrigible letter-writer such as Herbert Somerton Foxwell managed to accumulate a collection of over 20,000 letters to and from his late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century contemporaries. Richard Freeman's account of how he managed to prevent destruction or dispersal of

this collection will be one of the more arresting stories to appear alongside his catalogue of Foxwell's papers.

In my own more or less random visits to archives around the country in the past year or so, I have been heartened by serendipitous findings. For example, a case of good practice can be found in the case of the papers of Duncan Black, the public choice theorist whose papers are now in the care of the Glasgow University Archive Service. Black, it could be argued, was under-regarded for a large part of his career, though a case could be made for him as a candidate for the posthumous award of the Nobel Prize. He spent most of his professional life at University College of North Wales at Bangor, but willed his papers to his *alma mater* and the university where he obtained his first appointment; he also left funds to help finance publication. Judging from a catalogue of over a hundred and seventy pages, there is not much missing from papers that cover every phase of his life from his undergraduate days onwards. George Shackle is another example of an economist belonging to our target period who took similar care when depositing his papers with the Cambridge University Library and leaving a parallel record at Liverpool.

The website we have created will be used to post recent discoveries, seek additional information, and give illustrative examples designed to raise the level of interest shown in archival material. Let me illustrate the last of these points from my recent visits to archives in Glasgow and Edinburgh respectively. The papers of Alec Macfie, the holder of the Adam Smith chair at Glasgow from 1945 to 1958, include a remarkable sequence of over seventy letters written as a subaltern in the Gordon Highlanders to his mother during the First World War, before he was wounded on the Asiago Plateau. No less remarkable, if it still exists, would be the correspondence generated in the course of collecting the Scottish paintings that were part of the Macfie bequest to the Hunterian Gallery. Sir Alexander Gray held the Edinburgh chair of political economy from 1935 to 1956, and many of the papers that are preserved relate to one of his main non-economic activities: the translation of Danish ballads into Scots and the publication of his own verse in the Scottish dialect. Any account of Lionel Robbins's papers that took no account of his role as trustee of the National Gallery and director of the Royal Opera House would falsify the record. The economic memory cannot be confined to economic memories alone.

The formula we employed in 1975 when compiling entries was to record major collections of papers (noting those cases where no papers appear to have been preserved), accompanied by a brief description of their content. Under 'Correspondents' was listed the names of the chief persons with whom the subject had corresponded, together with information on the location and quantity of letters received or exchanged. Finally, under 'Printed

Material' the main biographical and/or bibliographic sources were recorded for each subject. The digital version will, of course, enable readers to search more rapidly by name or location. But how are we going to carry out the myriad inquiries needed to make the new guide, like its predecessor, a reliable research tool for future historians? At present we do not have the level of funding to check all promising sources, though visits to archives are essential to verify descriptions and inspect material that may await cataloguing. Visits also strengthen the bond with archivists. I have appealed to historians of economics and would like to broaden that appeal by asking any reader of this newsletter who has an interest in this project to contact me, even if that interest is confined to only one of the economists belonging to the second half of the twentieth century. Copies of the search lists will be sent to anyone expressing an interest in undertaking the necessary searches in archives in their own university or locality. Tracing relatives who still have papers should be easier for this period than the earlier one. A further long-term aim, of course, is to persuade economists that their papers could be invaluable to those conducting research on modern economic thinking in future. As we build up a collective portrait of the state of the archives that exist in this country, we may be able to prevent damaging losses and match our friends who work on the archives of contemporary scientists by offering advice on those places that are the most appropriate locations for specific collections.

Notes:

1 The project was run by a committee consisting of R D C Black (Chairman), A W Coats, Bernard Corry, and myself as members, with Lionel Robbins and Roger Ellis, then head of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, as consultants.

2 *Papers of British antiquaries and historians*, Guides to Sources for British History based on the National Register of Archives, TSO, 2003.

3 E Roy Weintraub, Stephen J Meardon, Ted Gayer, and H Spencer Banzhaf, 'Archiving the History of Economics', *Journal of Economic Literature*, XXXVI, September, 1998, 1496-1501.

4 In addition to their work as economic historians of the twentieth century, Susan Howson and Donald Moggridge have undertaken major editorial tasks and biographical studies on twentieth-century economists. Howson is the editor of *The Collected Papers of James Meade* (1988-90, volumes 1 to 3) and, with Moggridge, the editor of Meade's Cabinet Office diary (*Collected Papers*, volume 4) and the *The wartime diaries of Lionel Robbins and James Meade* (1990). She is currently completing the official biography of Lionel Robbins.

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Moggridge is the author of *Maynard Keynes*; an economist's biography (1992) and one of the chief editors of the RES edition of *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes* (30 volumes, 1971-89). He is currently editing a collection of the professional correspondence of Dennis Robertson and has recently finished a biography of Harry G Johnson.

5 A representative list includes: the Higher Education Archives Hub, Scottish Archives Network (SCAN), Archive-to-Archive (A2A), and Archives in the London and M25 Area (AIM25).

6 D Besomi (ed), *The Collected Interwar Papers and Correspondence of Roy Harod*, 3 volumes, (2003).

7 T R Malthus; *The Unpublished Papers in the Collection of Kanto Gakuen University* edited by John Pullen and Trevor Hughes Parry, 2 volumes (1997 and 2004).

8 Manifestly so in the case of Peter Groeneweger's *A Soaring Eagle: Alfred Marshall, 1842-1924* (1995) and John K Whitaker's edition of *The Correspondence of Alfred Marshall*, 3 volumes (1996). See also Phyllis Deane, *The Life and Times of J Neville Keynes* (2001); and Maria Cristina Marcuzzo and Annalisa Rosselli (eds) *Economists in Cambridge; a study through their correspondence, 1907-46* (2005).

9 'Economists Unpublished Papers', RES Newsletter, issue 99, October 1997, pp. 20-22.