

John Whitaker (30 January 1933–25 January 2016): A memoir and a tribute

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John Whitaker, the distinguished theorist and Marshall Scholar at the University of Virginia, died in January 2016 just before his 83rd birthday. John and Geoff Harcourt became close friends as PhD students at Cambridge in the late 1950s. The research students worked in the old Marshall Library in Downing Street and John and Geoff went most afternoons to the University Café just round the corner to natter over tea and toasted raisin buns.

John was an unassuming man, always true to his working-class roots in Lancashire, and wonderful company. It was obvious that he was outstandingly intelligent with a powerful analytical mind coupled with his great humanity. His PhD dissertation on growth theory was reckoned to be the best theoretical dissertation written at Cambridge. When Robin Matthews was appointed to the Drummond Chair at Oxford in 1965, John was the unanimous choice of the Cambridge Faculty to replace him. Bristol, where John was then lecturing, countered by appointing him to a Chair in theoretical economics, which he held until he went to Virginia for over 30 years of highly distinguished service.

At Virginia, John chaired the Department of Economics from 1979 to 1982. He was appointed the Georgia Bankard Professor of Economics in 1992, and became Professor Emeritus when he retired in 2003. He was greatly respected, admired and liked by his colleagues to whom he was selflessly supportive. One of them, David Mills (2016), wrote,

John was the consummate economic theorist ... His breadth of knowledge was exceptional. For more than 30 years, he was an active participant in every aspect of the department's academic life ... A former colleague once observed that John's only known vices were bicycling and collecting books. (p. 4)

Noting that Whitaker's great passion was bike riding, Mills comments that outside of his academic pursuits, '[John was] ... a founding member of the Charlottesville Bicycle Club. His lifelong love ... sprang from his childhood in Lancashire ... where he loved to cycle through the countryside and found success as a competitive cyclist' (p. 2).

Geoff greatly admired John Whitaker for his scholarly achievements and his sensible views on what economics should be but increasingly was not. Hence, his increasing absorption in Marshall scholarship which was universally acclaimed. With typical understatement, John Whitaker wrote in his *Who's Who in Economics* entry,

After starting out as an economic theorist [he] focussed increasingly on the history of economics, especially ... of economic theory. [He] concentrated on the last third of the nineteenth century and especially on Alfred Marshall, whose early manuscripts [John] brought to light and whose extensive correspondence [he] edited. [John believed] this kind of work [had] social value – perhaps on the ground that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it – although it is by nature something of a minority avocation. (In Blaug, 1999: 1166)

Neil Hart comments that John's intellect and collegiality can be observed clearly through his contributions to the modern literature on Alfred Marshall's role in the development of economic thought. John's meticulous assembling of, and insightful commentary on, Marshall's unpublished early writings on economics and the correspondence of Marshall paved the way for the subsequent re-interpretation of Marshall's economics. Here, John himself played a leading role, particularly in the analysis and evaluation of Marshall's approaches to the theory of value and distribution.

When Neil was beginning to do postgraduate studies on Alfred Marshall, his then supervisor, Peter Groenewegen, suggested that he contact John in order to get advice on particular aspects of Marshall's work. Within a couple of weeks, a large envelope arrived, containing a copy of a lengthy annotated draft of a paper that John had been working on, together with an invitation to enter into correspondence on the issues. Similar responses were forthcoming in later meetings with John at history of economics conferences and workshops. John Whitaker was a tremendous source of guidance and encouragement for those seeking to further develop the insights he shared so readily with his colleagues.

Geoff and John remained friends for the rest of John's life, usually by correspondence, swapping papers and their not dissimilar views on the state of economics. Geoff comments, 'He was always a supportive honest friend and I count myself extraordinarily fortunate to have known him'. As in his professorial life so in his private life, he provided continuous love and support. He was a wonderful example of compassionate old fashioned virtues and verities, to which one of his daughters, Jane Datta (24 October 2016) bore witness: 'He never promoted himself. He was a remarkable man, and I realize now more than ever before how lucky my siblings and I were to have had him as a guide – in our academic studies and in life'.

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References

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