

Professor A. W. (Bob) Coats: 1924–2007

Peter Groenewegen*

Bob Coats, so well known to many Australian historians of economic thought (and economic historians), died on Friday, 9 April 2007, aged 82 years, following a short illness. A small private funeral took place on 13 April in the presence of members of his immediate family.

Bob Coats devoted much of his long life to studying the history of ideas across disciplines, especially the social sciences, as well as to aspects of economic, social and labour history during the early decades of his long academic and teaching career. He himself once listed his contributions as work on the borderlines of history of economics, methodology, and the sociology of the professions, studies of economic thought and policy and of the role of economists in government. For many years Bob Coats was Professor of Economic and Social History at Nottingham University. However, he also held many visiting professorships including the University of Texas, Emory University, University of Western Australia, Duke University, and regularly attended (and organised) HOPE Conferences, HES Conferences, the annual conferences of the British HET Society, as well as the European HET Conferences that were organised from 1996 on an annual basis.

It is not my intention in this brief memorial note to comment on Bob's extensive scholarship and the vast range of his academic publications. I only wish to recollect briefly some of his visits to Australia and his specific contributions to the development of HET in Australia. As already indicated, he was an academic visitor to the University of Western Australia in 1980, a visit organised by Ray Petridis. That visit was probably influential in inspiring the first Australian Conference of the History of Economic Thought at the University of New England (Armidale) through the initiatives of John Cunningham Wood, Ray Petridis and John Pullen. Bob and Ray in any case were good friends, and Bob contributed a chapter, 'The Role of Economists in Government in International Agencies: A Fresh Look at the Field' to Ray's *festchrift*, published as a special issue of *HER* (No. 34) in Summer 2001. In 1987, Bob visited the University of Newcastle, attending among other things the HETSA Conference held there in May 1987 (*HETSA Bulletin* No. 7) where he gave a guest lecture on the institutionalisation of Political Economy in British, European, American and Japanese universities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (abstracted in *ibid.*, pp. 1-2). He also gave the 1987 R. C. Mills Memorial Lecture on the subject of Economists in Government. During 1995, he visited the University of New South Wales, and in addition contributed a paper on 'Utilitarianism, Oxford Idealism and Cambridge Economics' for the workshop on economics and ethics which I organised in Sydney that year for the Sydney University Centre for the Study of the History of Economic Thought in collaboration with the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. In 1997, Bob Coats was an academic visitor at the University of Wollongong, his last of four visits to Australia. In that year, he attended the HETSA Conference at the University of Notre Dame Australia.

On a more personal note, I might indicate that I first met Bob Coats briefly at the London School of Economics during the early 1960s, where he was giving a

seminar in Dick Coleman's Economic History department. I subsequently met him in 1972 when on a 'sabbatical' in the United Kingdom at both the HET Conference organised in Birmingham that year by Terence Hutchison (the programme of which included a very memorable visit to Gatcomb Park), and at one of Robbins' seminars at the London School where he gave a paper on the importance of Kuhn's work and that of Lakatos on the structure of scientific revolutions with specific reference to economics and the social sciences, the marginal revolution in particular. This drew on the findings of the 1971 HOPE Conference on that subject, which Bob Coats had helped to organise with Craufurd Goodwin and Bob Black at the Rockefeller Conference Centre in Bellagio (Italy), the location arranged through the good offices of Piero Barucci (then Professor of HET at the University of Florence). My extensive correspondence with him dates from 1980, covering mutual points of interest and clearly indicating my indebtedness to him for giving me frequent advice combined with careful criticism on books and papers then in preparation. Of such advice, his careful commentary on the first draft of my Marshall biography, undertaken in 1992 to 1994, was by far the most important and saved me from many errors in writing that book.

My last meeting with him was at Treviso in 2004, from which I recall in particular a wait in the rain for a coach which would take us into nearby Venice for the opening reception and an exhibition in the context of the ESHET Conference for that year. During that conference we also spent some time together, with Sonia his wife, imbibing delicious white wine at a Villa Ca' Marcello in Levado di Piombino Dese (Italy), another feature of the magnificent cultural programme of this ESHET Conference.

His last letter to me, preserved in my correspondence file with him, dated January 2001, gave me advice on publishing my collected papers on the history of economic thought, which I was then contemplating. I quote:

The only tip I can give you about publishing a collection (or several?) of your writings is advice Mark Blaug gave me. Namely: don't revise, or add additions or explanations of when and why a certain item was produced, unless there is a strong specific reason for doing so. The shameful delay in the production of my Vol III is due to my desire to include two general pieces (still unwritten) on historiography and methodology, either as introductory items or conclusions (in the middle and end of the volume). However, personal reminiscences or brief introductory remarks are welcome and, it must be said, are sometimes more interesting and revealing than the main dishes. (Current correspondent excluded, of course!) If you feel strongly about any of the reviews or responses to the Marshall volume you could re-examine them—for it is a very important contribution.

This letter also contained an account of a burglary and some flooding of their cottage in Nottingham, their enjoyment in watching the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games on television, some good wishes about some health problems I was then experiencing, ending with a brief reference to the problems Bob was having in completing his contribution to the Petridis *festschrift* because 'I still greatly enjoy research, but not writing'. This current trait he also described as 'a pity'.

Many of us will have our favourite memories of this fine man, an excellent historian of ideas, whose voice is now silent. On behalf of the international history of economic thought fraternity I hereby express sincere condolences to his widow,

Sonia, and his children, Louise, Simon and Peter, on their loss of a husband and father. As a friend and colleague he will also be sorely missed. His many writings will, however, continue to offer inspiration to historians of economics in Australia as much as in the wider world at large.

* Department of Economics, University of Sydney, Sydney NSW 2006, Australia.
Email: peter.groenewegen7@bigpond.com.