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JHET INTERVIEWS: JAMES P. HENDERSON

BY
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TALES OF AN OPTIMISTIC REFORMER

Stories drive the history of economics. Some historians follow the paths of a single idea as it shifts and reshapes itself across time and space; others begin with the work and life of a single economist and gradually expand their knowledge of that economist's networks, positions, and the époque in which they wrote until they seem to know everything about writers who tackled economic thought in a particular time and place. Some historians focus on a series of well-defined yet distinct projects, while others range more broadly, highlighting the contributions of a variety of apparently unconnected economists, ideas, and episodes. Exploring the work of such a playful intellect is both charming and puzzling, and sometimes the underlying narrative that links all these disparate interests emerges only gradually as a reader slowly absorbs a lifetime of work.

Jim Henderson is one such historian of economics. President of the History of Economics Society in 1995–96, Jim spent a career, mostly at Valparaiso University in Indiana, following his lively imagination across the breadth of classical economics. His work makes its appearance in collections of essays and journal issues and in his well-known monograph *Early Mathematical Economics: William Whewell and the British Case* (1996a), but Jim himself is at his best at conferences, immersed in mischievous conversation with other historians who enjoy his wit. He always has a story to tell, often focusing on an unknown or unexpected contribution to political economy, and sometimes zeroing in on an underappreciated aspect of a well-known writer's work. That radar for outsiders is what motivates most of Jim's historical work; he has a penchant for examining the economic contributions of those on the margins.

Jim earned his PhD in 1977 from Northern Illinois University on the topic of British mathematical economics. He began his teaching career at Pecatonica High School in Illinois in 1960, immediately after earning his BA in Economics from Beloit College. In 1967, with a fresh MA under his belt, he moved to Hope College, and from there to Valparaiso University in 1975, where he spent the rest of his career.

The following is a highly edited and somewhat idiosyncratic summary of a series of phone calls in the summer of 2024.

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Forget: I've been rereading your work. You have some great titles: "Wicked Cant," "'Political Economy is a Mere Skeleton Unless …,'" "The Good Samaritan was a bad economist," "Should economists count?," "Beggars: Jeremy Bentham versus William Wordsworth" …

Henderson: [laughs] You like those, eh?

Forget: Great titles, but you've done a lot of careful historical work. I note, in particular, "Emerging Learned Societies: Economic Ideas in Context" (1996b), which was your presidential address, I believe, for the History of Economics Society. And there are several pieces related to that: "The Place of Economics in the Hierarchy of Sciences: Section F from Whewell to Edgeworth" (1994), and "Ordering Society: The Early Uses of Classification in the British Statistical Organizations" (1995). Together, these articles trace the emergence of political economy as a unique social science during the classical period in Britain.

I'm going to ask you a hard question: If you had to choose just three of your publications, which three are you most proud of?

Henderson: I think I'd highlight, first, my book *Early Mathematical Economics: William Whewell and the British Case* (1996a). That had a twenty-year genesis. It was based on my doctoral research.

Second, I'd choose "'Political Economy is a Mere Skeleton Unless …': What Can Social Economists Learn From Charles Dickens?" That was published in *Review of Social Economy* in 2000. It was my presidential address for the Association for Social Economics. I was president in 1999–2000, president-elect in 1998–99, vice-president in 1997–98, and Midwest regional director earlier. I was associate editor of *Review of Social Economy.* I've been affiliated with social economics for a long time, and the editor told me that particular paper, my presidential address, was the most requested article for years afterwards. Another good title, I guess.

Third, I worked hard on "Emerging Learned Societies: Economic Ideas in Context," which was my presidential address for the History of Economics Society.

Forget: Let me talk about your book first. Margaret Schabas reviewed it, very favorably, for *Isis.* Yet she wrote:

> James Henderson's book on Whewell's forays into political economy is essentially a story about failure, although Henderson makes a concerted effort to find some of Whewell's lasting contributions. Whewell, for example, gave a fairly sophisticated account of the elasticity of demand and sorted out some of the technical problems of foreign exchange rates that had eluded Ricardo and Mill. More important, Henderson sheds light on the longstanding mystery as to why Whewell chose to use mathematics in a subject that was otherwise literary and that he believed was overly deductive. … Perhaps even more mysterious is the fact that Whewell, a champion of the differential calculus, used only elementary algebra. Even Malthus, in a letter to Whewell, had

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> suggested that there might be a natural place in economics for the calculus because of its emphasis on extrema. So this is a tale not only of poor timing but of missed opportunity. (Schabas 1998, p. 141)

Harvey Becher, who wrote the Foreword to your book, said that your work "should help to erase the picture of Whewell as a scholist … because he, like other of his contemporaries, transcended disciplinary barriers and had 'unprofessional' employment and obligations" (in Henderson 1996a, p. xvi). He went on to claim, "Henderson unsheathes the contributions to economics of some of Whewell's lesser-known cohorts, for instance, those of John William Lubbock" (p. xvi). Becher also writes that "Henderson delineates the cultural context, the institutional contexts, the philosophical contexts, and Whewell's motivations relative to economics" (p. xvi).

Becher and Schabas both suggest that your work is a contribution not only to the history of economics but also to the history of science and to history more generally. You, yourself, write that Phil Mirowski urged you to complete and publish this book.

Henderson: You asked me earlier whether I had any advice to newcomers to our field—to people just starting out. I think history of science is the way to go. I would strongly encourage all historians of economics to take a broader view of knowledge.

I've always been attracted to the work of outsiders. Who is an economist, who is an insider, and who is watching from outside? What contributions do these outsiders bring? I remember working on Hyde Clarke and talking to Warren Samuels over coffee about Clarke's work on sunspots, and he introduced me to Collison Black. I've got at least two papers on Clarke, both in *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*. One was called "Astronomy, Astrology, and the Business Cycle: Hyde Clarke's Contribution" (1992), and the second in the same volume called "Hyde Clarke's Publications: Papers Presented at Meetings of Scientific Societies, and Other Notes and Letters of Interest" (1992). Collison Black took part of Clarke's writings and composed a kind of Kondratiev wave. Warren published both side by side.

And, of course, Dickens, Wordsworth … the critics, the poets, the novelists…. What can social economists learn from Charles Dickens?

Forget: So, what can social economists learn from Charles Dickens? By the way, I love the last line of that article: "Most of us social economists turned to economics because we wanted to do some good, unlike so many of our colleagues in the mainstream who turned to economics because they wanted to do some arithmetic!" (Henderson 2000, p. 151).

Henderson: That article builds on GK Chesterton's distinction between optimistic and pessimistic reformers. Chesterton argued that reformers must hold simultaneously two opposed beliefs: they must argue that the oppressed are miserable but at the same time immensely attractive and important, because if they ease up on their misery, critics will argue that reform is not essential, while if they ease up on their attractiveness, opponents will argue that reform is hopeless. That is the dilemma of the social economist. Dickens was a reformer—an optimistic reformer because he believed in the inherent dignity of human beings—but he wanted to reform economics as much as he wanted to reform economic conditions. He wanted to make sure economics considered the human beings at its core.

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Forget: The third piece you mentioned was your presidential address for the History of Economics Society (HES). It's very carefully written and well worth rereading.

Henderson: Did you know I was present at the first HES meeting at the University of Chicago in 1973? It was interesting—all plenaries. The most memorable HES meeting was probably the 1984 meeting in Pittsburg. That's when they introduced the Pittsburg variant: the idea was that the discussant would present the paper and then criticize it, and the author would then have an opportunity to respond. I presented "Agency or Alienation: Smith, Mill, and Marx on the Joint-Stock Company"; Craufurd Goodwin was my discussant. When he finished, I remember thinking, what's left to say? It worked pretty well for some of us, but I remember having coffee with a woman who had presented on Jane Marcet. Apparently, her discussant spent the entire time talking about how "Marcet" should be pronounced.

I think the HES has been a very positive organization. It supported all of us when we very often worked in isolation at our separate colleges. There is hardly ever more than one or two of us at any one place, and those were the days before email, so the HES has been incredibly valuable.

Forget: Tell me about your teaching. I see you began as a high school teacher before you went to graduate school. What drew you to the history of economics and how did you end up at Valparaiso?

Henderson: I've always been interested in the history of economics, ever since my undergraduate days at Beloit College. My MA was on a different topic, but I was drawn to the history of the field as an undergraduate. I took a first job after my MA at a small college in Michigan, but I moved to Valparaiso in 1975 because I was looking for a place where research and intellectual pursuits were respected. I enjoy teaching, and it's a great luxury to spend time doing what interests you. The students are quite good and very interested. I always enjoyed reading teaching evaluations and I usually learned something. They are often very funny. I remember early in my career, I'd just introduced the subject and talked about what we would do in the class and why it was important. One guy raised his hand with a question, and when I called on him, he said, "When are you going to wear a suit?"

Forget: When I was asked to do this interview, I looked up your CV and I think you've coauthored only one article. You collaborate a lot, but you publish on your own. You coauthored "Adam Smith's Influence on Hegel's Philosophical Writings" with John B. Davis, so I called up Davis and asked him what he thought of you. I was hoping for some scurrilous gossip, but John Davis is too well behaved. You may be interested to know that he said he still occasionally gets requests for that article, which was published in 1991. What he wrote is, I think, a really nice tribute to you and to your work:

> Jim and I are/were closer in age and more like friends and allies, particularly in two domains: the HES and the Association for Social Economics. I was HES VP [Vice President] in 92–3 and he was in 95–6. Jim was then president of the ASE in 1999. I had been editor of the *Review of Social Economy* since 1987 and as you can see from his publications he had been publishing in the journal since 1990. He saw himself as both an historian and social economist. Where the latter was important was with respect to the

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> role of social values in economics. The JHET paper we did was the one thing we wrote together. He did the Smith; I did the Hegel. Occasionally scholars still ask me for it.
>
> I will try to say a few things about his character. He had a critical bent towards much accepted economic thinking and its proponents, often expressed ironically or even sarcastically, depending on the audience. But he was a very serious scholar, careful, insightful, and inclined to rehabilitate neglected ideas, like Whewell. And not pretentious in the least, indeed a humble person by nature. I always felt affectionate toward him but was also intimidated by his grasp of the history of economics. I can't give you anecdotes. I have a terrible memory for that sort of thing.
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> In terms of HES history, Jim was a second-generation person, not of the founders' generation but the next bunch, people who were their students or younger colleagues. This was a time when the history of economic thought and the HES were prospering and there was a lot of optimism about the future. Jim and others saw the hand-off to a third generation as having a more mixed future. HES was being dropped from PhD training and the handwriting was on the wall. I would say he was "philosophical" about this. Always a no-nonsense realist about economics (and the world we live in). Probably angry at mainstream complacency, but not ever really expecting better. He just went on doing his research with care and pride.
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> One thing I would however draw some attention to is his interest in economics in fiction, for example the Dickens paper. Aside from being a dedicated scholar to do this kind of research, you have to be quite conscientious to do it in order to elicit what writers like Dickens thought. I guess another thing required of this kind of research is a love of literature, a not always common trait among historians. (JB Davis, 30 August 2024, personal communication)

Jim, I've enjoyed our conversations, and I've really enjoyed rereading and rediscovering some things you've known for a very long time. Thank you.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view a bibliography of James P. Henderson's publications, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1053837225100850.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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