

John and Ursula Hicks – A Personal Recollection

I have had the good fortune to know two men of something like genius, both of whom became life-long friends and from whom I received much personal kindness as well intellectual benefit. And I cannot think of them apart from their two exceptional and friendly wives.

The first was Karl Popper whom I met in 1939 when I went to Canterbury University College where he was the senior lecturer in philosophy, and gave him some help in writing the great *Open Society and its Enemies*, and also *The Poverty of Historicism*, both written with secretarial and other help from his devoted wife Hennie. But I got much more from him than I could give; insight into scientific method, probability theory and mathematics in its application to economics. I recall particularly his elucidation for me of R.G.D. Allen's mathematical half of the *Reconsideration of the Theory of Value* which was written in collaboration with J. R. Hicks in 1934¹, and his encouragement to persevere with the study of *Value and Capital* which Hicks published in 1939. This germinal work, together with Jan Tinbergen's *Statistical Testing of Business Cycles* (1938) gave me new insights into economics and its possibilities, reinforced by reading current volumes of *Econometrica*², again aided by Karl. In them I found John's important article, *Mr Keynes and the Classics*, and also his useful survey of monopoly theory. I had not then read his first paper, a neo-classical one, *The Theory of Wages*, although I had learnt something of its ideas from studying R.G.D. Allen's *Mathematical Analysis for Economists*.

I was not able to proceed far in such directions because I entered the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1942 and had a tour in the Pacific Islands (as a meteorologist). But when it became clear that Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan could be defeated, I decided to try building a bridge to my future by writing to John Hicks, then Professor of Economics at Manchester. I sent him two articles, which I had published, in *The Economic Record* on budgetary reform, drawing a good deal on Swedish theory and practice of counter-cycle budgeting. It turned out that Ursula Hicks, who had a strong interest in public finance, had helped Erik Lindahl prepare the English edition of his *Studies in the Theory of Money and Capital* (1939) when he came to the LSE to arrange for this³. She and John, moreover, collaborated during the war years in work on local authority rating and other aspects of public finance.⁴ My joint articles were thus well received and John encouraged me to plan coming to Manchester to do a Ph D under his supervision. Later he wrote to say that he was leaving Manchester to take up an official fellowship at the new undeveloped Nuffield College in Oxford, and suggested that I should plan to come there for my postgraduate study.

But the War ended in 1945, Karl left to take up a readership in Logic and Scientific Method at the London School of Economics and I quite unexpectedly, was appointed to the vacant chair of economics at Auckland University College. I wrote to John explaining this appointment and saying that nevertheless I hoped to join him before long for postgraduate work. He answered expressing doubts about that, and I had them, too. Then came two unexpected strokes of luck. The Rockefeller Foundation offered me a generous fellowship for two years of overseas study, and the council of the College approved my taking leave (on half pay) for this purpose. I wrote to John with this news and also enclosing an article which I had written, *Notes on the Theory of Discriminating Monopoly*. This was published before the end of 1947 in *The Review of Economic Studies*, of which Ursula was an editor. Greatly elated I set out for Oxford and arrived there in January 1947.

¹ I also read *Theorie Mathématique de la Valeur* (1937) in which John set out his basic analysis of value theory, before *Value and Capital* appeared.

² I could read most of it then.

³ John also gained from Lindahl's visit by becoming aware of Swedish ideas on economic dynamics and temporary equilibria, ideas which were used in *Value and Capital*.

⁴ In 1948 John published a small book on *The Problem of Budgetary Reform*, and had asked my opinion on some of its content.

My wife and I were soon invited by John to a lunch at what was then Halifax House with Ursula and Herbert Frankel, a South African who held the chair of economic development and whom John had known during the year he served as a temporary replacement lecturer at the University of Johannesburg. It was a very pleasant personal introduction to the Hicks, both friendly and Ursula warm where John was shy or reserved, and good to meet Herbert, a fellow 'colonial' and an able economist. They were very encouraging and John soon arranged that I should become a research fellow of Nuffield (unpaid), that he should be my supervisor for a thesis on what I took to be business cycles in New Zealand, introduced me to the excellent facilities of Rhodes House and got me a room in the Institute of Statistics where I benefited from contact with Patrick Moran and David Champernowne. I attended his weekly seminar for Nuffield students and heard interesting exchange between him and a visiting Paul Samuelson on the valuation of the social income; and Ian Little, then a research student, astounded us with a brilliant paper on revealed preference. I also attended the lectures John was giving in 1948 on Keynesian theory – lectures which became the basis of *A Contribution to the Theory of the Trade Cycle* which he published in 1950. All this was inspiring, although I was somewhat less impressed by his style of lecturing than by his superb writing. Much, too, was gained from the Friday dinners for fellows of the College⁵, an able lot presided over genially by Henry Clay. The conversation was good and there were often interesting guests, including on one occasion Lord Nuffield, then the only founder of an Oxford College who could dine with its fellows. Unlike the distinguished ecclesiastics and nobles who had much earlier founded the other colleges, Nuffield was the son of a farm labourer who began his career with a bicycle shop in Oxford, going from that to become the leading British manufacturer of automobiles. The college which he had endowed in 1938, on the urging of Alexander Lindsay, was also distinctive in being an institution for research and post-graduate work in the social sciences, and in being bisexual although, when I was there, the students were all men many of whom, like me, had done war service.⁶

Ursula was also teaching and supervising postgraduate students in the field of public finance, and taking a particular interest in African or Asian students, one of whom was Gamini Corea who later became governor of Sri Lanka's central bank. During term she and John lived in a Nuffield flat but at other times in Porch House at the Cotswold village of Blockley. This house had belonged to John's uncle who left it to John's sister, from whom Ursula bought it. A fairly large historic building, once a country residence of the bishops of Gloucester, it had been divided into two sections the larger of which was occupied by a distinguished woman who had retired from the Civil Service and the smaller one used by the Hicks. There they spent weekends and vacations with their constant companion Sammy, a very appealing cat. John's secretary, young Pat Rathbone, also lived in Blockley with her father and his wealthy second wife. Porch house had a large garden which gave scope for Ursula's considerable interest in things botanical. Painting, especially interesting scenery, was another of her hobbies. They seemed very happy, content with each other⁷, revelling in their professional lives, which often extended beyond their much loved Oxford, and enjoying their spells in the lovely Cotswolds. We Nuffield students, as one of us put it, appreciated Ursula's warm heart and John's remarkable brain.⁸

⁵ These were held in an old vicarage in Woodstock Road; it also provided the fellows' common room. The College's buildings were still being planned. Classes and administration were conducted in an old house plus army huts in Banbury Road, and fellows, including the Warden, were housed in flats of converted Victorian houses. There were, of course, disadvantages in these interim arrangements but they also were associated with a fresh spirit of academic pioneering.

⁶ The senior fellow of the College, however, was Margery Perham, a colonial historian.

⁷ I recall once hastily entering a carriage on the train from Paddington to Oxford and found myself sitting, by accident, next to John and Ursula. They told me, happily but rather shyly, that the day was their wedding anniversary and they had had a celebratory dinner in a favoured London restaurant.

⁸ A possible exception was Ian Little who, after having had John as his supervisor, had differences with him and transferred to supervision by Phillip Andrews.

We were glad to be invited to Porch House for a day trip twice and to make friends with Sammy. So, when the Hicks were to spend a month of the summer vacation in the United States⁹, we were offered the use of their part of Porch House so that we could care for Sammy. It was a wonderful experience. The weather was exceptionally good, the Cotswolds were largely empty of tourists and motor cars and so little commercialised. We had good times exploring charming villages on our bikes – when I was not working on my thesis. Then in September John generously arranged for me to go instead of him to an international conference of economists held in Genoa, where we were lavishly entertained by its communist mayor. I was visited at my hotel by a local professor who, having seen from the conference programme that I came from Oxford, wanted to know whether John was doing more work to develop general equilibrium theory. He explained that he and other Italian economists were very interested in this theory and admired *Value and Capital*, but had been cut off by the war from access to English or American journals

In March we set out for Scandinavia, supplied by introductions from John to his friends Erik Lindahl in Uppsala and Carl Iversen in Copenhagen, both of whom treated us well. Next month the foundation stone for Nuffield College's building was laid with great ceremony, involving a Chancellor's procession and a lunch at Christ Church for university officials, fellows of the College and their wives, and many academics from other universities. There were, of course, speeches which referred to the contribution Nuffield College could make to the social sciences and to the University. Lord Nuffield made a rather different speech, in which he said that he had always found the entrance to Oxford from the railway station unimpressive and that the College, when built, would improve things in that respect.

In August John and Ursula went on another overseas trip and we were again in Porch House for a month of glorious weather. Sammy welcomed us by jumping from an open skylight into the bathroom. We were back again at Porch House in December. By then I had passed my examination for a D Phil¹⁰, had a modified version of the thesis accepted for publication by the Clarendon Press, booked our return passages to Auckland, and had a farewell party given for us by the Nuffield fellows, at which I became the first to sign the Nuffield Register.

Our weekend visit to Porch House was also a farewell by the Hicks, who had succeeded in getting possession of the whole of it. We helped them move furniture and books from the smaller to the larger part of the house. The other guest there was Sandy Henderson and the three of us had to join a search led by a concerned Ursula to find Sammy before returning with them to Oxford by car¹¹. On the 16th we had to go by train to Southampton to embark, and were farewelled at this station by both the Hicks and the Poppers. John and Ursula were themselves about to set off from England for Nigeria to advise about its new constitution, especially about the financial aspects.

In these two years I thus had the good fortune to be helped by a man who was still taking a leading role in shaping what Maurice Peston has called 'the golden days of economic theory' - days when economics was exciting, promising to offer much and not yet so entangled with mathematics or ideology as to limit its appeal or intelligibility. John Hicks and Paul Samuelson between them were largely founding what came to be called neo-classical economics, although John's interests were much wider, embracing history, European literature and music. In many respects, he was a splendid example of plain living and high thinking, combined with a tolerant and democratic humanitarianism that extended to all countries, developed or underdeveloped economically.

⁹ On his visit John saw old friends such as Schumpeter and Viner, and met their younger colleagues, Samuelson, Arrow, Friedman and Patinkin all of whom were influenced by *Value and Capital* in working on neo-classical synthesising.

¹⁰ Ian Little and I were the only Nuffield students of our year to complete this qualification. Most of the rest had been absorbed into one or other of the many prevailing opportunities for employment as academics or as recruits to government and the new international agencies.

¹¹ It was driven by Ursula, John did not drive.

After our return to Auckland we corresponded with the Hicks and sent the fruit cakes which they valued, under the tight rationing that still held in Britain, to provide refreshment for the younger Oxford economists who attended John's regular seminar on economic theory. (It was started because of his concern that some youngish people had been appointed to tutor in the colleges before they were fully equipped in economics.) But before long rationing ceased. In 1952, John was appointed to the Drummond Chair of Political Economy which went with a fellowship of All Souls College, a connection which he greatly valued. He had to resign from Nuffield as an Official Fellow with teaching duties, but retained his close connection with it by becoming one of its Faculty Fellows. During the 1950s and 1960s the British Empire was breaking up and some of the newly independent countries called on British economists for advice. John and Ursula thus received and accepted invitations, after Nigeria, from the West Indies, India and Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was still called. In many cases they were welcomed there by former students. He was also able to develop valued contacts with Italian economists some of whom, too, were former students. (He had gained a reading knowledge of Italian at his school, Clifton, and had used it to study Pareto, his inspiration for the theory of value, and to read Dante and other Italian authors¹².)

I did not see John again until he came to New York in April 1958 when I was there for a short time during tenure of a Carnegie Travelling Fellowship. He kindly invited my wife and me to a dinner he was giving for a few American friends, among them Ragnar Frish who had me to lunch at Columbia a few days later. After leaving the States I spent a few months in Stockholm and the Hague before coming to Oxford to complete my sabbatical leave. There I rented Francis Seton's flat, which was below that occupied by Ursula and John. We thus saw them fairly often¹³, I had dinner with John at All Souls, and we had another few days at Blockley where they had us witness their wills. Shortly after our return to Auckland, I learnt that John had recommended me for a chair at Southampton and went there for an unsuccessful interview. After it I came to Blockley for a few days where I was helped to lick my wounds.

Then in 1966-67 I had a Commonwealth Visiting Professorship at the new University of Essex where I had an interesting time. In my Masters' course on economic dynamics I made considerable use of *Capital and Growth*, which John had published in 1965, the year in which he also retired from his chair, and was glad to see how well the better students took to this book. I left Essex at the start of the summer vacation of 1967 and came to Oxford, where Nuffield provided me with academic hospitality, including a room, and the Hicks gave us the use of their new flat near the Observatory in Woodstock Road as they were spending their vacation in Blockley and again going overseas. But before they did we were their guests at the Oxford Encaenia, involving presentation of honorary degrees in the Sheldonian Theatre, lunch in the Codrington Library and a garden party. During my period in Essex I had written *The Traditional Trade of Asia* and John was helpful in arranging for it to be published by the Oxford University Press in London.

Back in Auckland I found conditions for my Department were worsening so much that I decided to apply for a vacant chair at Sydney University, and was strongly supported by both John and Karl (among others). My application was successful but before I could go to Sydney my wife died of a sudden heart attack. Ursula and John wrote me sympathetic letters about that. In 1972 I married again, this time to a Yorkshire lady living in Sydney, the same year that John received his Nobel prize. I went with her on sabbatical leave in 1974, spending short periods in Hull and Manchester as a visiting professor and spending my last months in Oxford. There, of course, we saw the Hicks, visited Blockley and, at their request moved into Porch House for a few weeks while they were away – but this time there was no Sammy or replacement for him.

¹² I was told that when he was ill in hospital in the mid-1960s, and could not read, he passed the time by trying to recall the *Inferno* from memory. Another poet who greatly attracted him was Yeats, a copy of whose *The Tower* he gave us after enthusiastically pointing out subtle Classical allusions in it. This reminds me that Ursula once told me of John's way of passing time on long journeys when he had run out of reading matter; he would recreate a mathematical theorem or attempt solving a mathematical puzzle.

¹³ Both were taking an active interest in developing Nuffield's gardens.

Two years later the Hicks came to the Australian National University at Canberra, where Ursula had been asked to contribute to a study on federal financial systems. On the way they stopped at Singapore to have hospitality from Lim Chong Yah, Head of the Department of Economics and Statistics at the National University there, who had also gained a D Phil under John's supervision. While they were there Ursula had the misfortune to fall and break her hip, which meant hospitalisation. Before that happened Ursula had indulged her passion for botany by visiting the public gardens. The accident prevented further visits so that John used his camera to take her shots of the parts of the gardens she had wanted to see again. I had a letter from him telling me this, that he and Ursula would be arriving in Sydney on their way to Canberra, and asking me to ensure that she got a wheel chair at Sydney's airport before going on a connecting flight to Canberra. I did so and greeted them when they arrived. When I asked Ursula if she would like a coffee I received an answer that what she needed was not coffee but a stiff whisky – it was promptly provided and drunk before they set off for Canberra.

While they were there, I had John invited to Sydney to deliver the Mills memorial lecture, and he gave us *Must Stimulating Demand Stimulate Inflation?*¹⁴ He also gave a talk which was eagerly attended by economists from all three metropolitan universities. After Ursula had completed her work in Canberra, I arranged that they should have academic hospitality in Sydney where John was also consulted by the Reserve Bank. We gave them also private hospitality and Ursula, struck by the fine view from our apartment, got out her sketch book to make drawings from which she later did a painting and gave it to us. During that visit they suggested that, on my retirement, we should come to live in the reconditioned smaller part of their Porch House under a life tenancy for Anna, a generous offer which we could not accept.

I retired from the University of Sydney in May, 1980, and immediately set out on a tour which brought us in July to England, where we stayed for some months during which we had another stay at Porch House. On my return I was asked by UNESCAP to go to Bangkok to work on an energy project, and then to do the annual economic survey of Asia for 1982. While I was completing it I had a letter from John, who was again in Singapore with Lim Chong Yah. He suggested that I break my return journey to Sydney by spending a few days in Singapore with him and Ursula. I did that and was invited to dinner with them at Lim's house, a very pleasant occasion. Not long after I reached Sydney a letter came from Lim saying that, on John's recommendation, I was offered a visiting professorship at the National University forthwith. I was glad to accept, and had a rewarding fourteen months with good colleagues and good advanced students.

In 1984 we were once more in Britain, and had another stay with the Hicks at Porch House, where we witnessed their signatures to new wills¹⁵. Back in Sydney I had a letter from John saying that Ursula was so ill as to be confined to bed, that he was looking after her with some difficulty because Porch House was not suited for nursing the sick. I was saddened next year to hear that she had died. In 1986 we returned to England and spent a week at a hotel in Chipping Camden from which we visited John, now living alone in Porch House. He spoke appreciatively of visits from his Oxford successor and also of a visit to Taipei organised by the Academia Sinica who had sent one of their men to escort him from England. While there he gave two important lectures which the Academia had printed in January 1986. One was *Towards a more General Theory* and the other *Managing Without Money*. He was also completing his last book, *A Market Theory of Money* (published in 1989)¹⁶, helped by useful advice from Tom Wilson, an old colleague who had written the *Times* obituary for Ursula. He had difficulty walking but seemed to be well enough otherwise.

¹⁴ This appears in Volume Two of his Collected Essays, *Money, Interest and Wages*,

¹⁵ They were presumably connected with Ursula's election to a fellowship of the new Linacre College, to which Porch House went after John's life tenancy expired.

¹⁶ Although John was dismissive of monetarism, this book was well reviewed by David Laidler, a strong monetarist whom John described to me as 'very clever'; in telling of a symposium in which both had participated at the Bank of England.

My last contacts with John were in 1988. We had again come to England and spent a few days in July at a hotel below Porch House and were invited to see him there. He was pleased about going soon to Italy for a gathering of leading economists from a number of countries to discuss the impact that *Value and Capital* had had upon economic thought. We took him to lunch the next day. Before leaving England in October I rang John. He had enjoyed the conference, but seemed rather depressed about his health. Within six months he was dead, and I had lost a valued friend who had done much to shape my thinking and my career. But, of course, I am only one of many who could say this the same about this gifted and kindly man.