

THE ONE AND ONLY HARRY

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Harry Gordon Johnson (1923-1977)

JOHNSON, HARRY GORDON (1923-1977), economist, was born 26 May 1923 in Toronto, Canada, the elder son of Henry Herbert Johnson, newspaperman and later secretary of the Liberal Party of Ontario, and his wife Frances Lily Muat, lecturer in Child Psychology at the Institute of Child Study of the University of Toronto. There were two children, both sons. He was educated at the University of Toronto schools and then obtained scholarships to the University of Toronto. After considering law, favored by his father, he entered the Honours course in Political Science and Economics. He developed an interest in the history of thought and was much influenced by Harold Innes' lectures and ideas on Canadian and general economic history. He later wrote that they remained an integral part of his intellectual equipment ever since. He graduated in 1943 and then, at age 21, became, for one year, acting professor and sole member of the economics staff at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

In 1944, he volunteered for active service in the Canadian armed forces and, after training, was sent to England in 1945, eventually doing clerical work in Canada House. Being demobilized in Britain, he was sent by the army to Cambridge,

became an affiliated student of Jesus College, and took another bachelor's degree, obtaining the top first class in the economics tripos. Maurice Dobb was his supervisor. He became a member of the Political Economy Club, and at his first meeting heard J.M. Keynes present a paper.

He then returned to Toronto, where he took the degree of MA while teaching for a year. By now, pure economics had become his central interest. In 1947 he enrolled as a graduate student in economics at Harvard, where he quickly made a mark on a generation of remarkable fellow students. He was particularly impressed by the breadth and the ideas of Joseph Schumpeter, which greatly influenced his writings in later years. He completed the course work requirements for the doctorate in three terms.

On the invitation of (Sir) Dennis Robertson [q.v.], he returned to the English Cambridge in 1949 as assistant lecturer and in 1950 became a lecturer and was also elected to a fellowship at King's College, then at the height of the fame to which it had been raised by J.M. Keynes and A.C. Pigou [qq.v.]. In 1956 he was appointed to a professorship in economic theory at the University of Manchester.

At Cambridge he flourished with teaching and, above all, embarking on his incredible research and writing career. But he was getting intellectual stimulation only from his students and from American visitors. The seven years at Cambridge began his alienation from British economics. As he saw it--and wrote about it in later years--his colleagues were stuck in dead monetary controversies, they were parochial and amateur, and the dominant Keynesian establishment was motivated in their economic analysis by political bias. In addition, the Cambridge economics faculty

was a battleground, fierce verbal battles being fought over questionably important issues.

Johnson was much happier with his colleagues at Manchester. He tried to build up a serious program of graduate education and took on a big teaching program himself. But the principal problem was lack of finance--the need for "penny-pinching" in British provincial universities, about which he also frequently complained later.

While at Cambridge and later in Manchester, he started his career as an international trade theorist and quickly became one of the world's leaders in this field. He produced a number of path-breaking articles, in particular pioneering the formal theory of trade and growth. These articles were published in the first of his many volumes of collected articles, *International Trade and Economic Growth* (1958). In later years he made similarly pioneering and influential contributions to the theory of tariffs, published in *Aspects of the Theory of Tariffs* (1971).

In 1959 he left Britain and accepted a professorship of economics at the University of Chicago. He remained at the Chicago economics department until his death, becoming the Charles F. Grey Distinguished Service Professor Economics in 1974. He found Chicago tremendously stimulating intellectually. Some adjustment was needed to powerful personalities, but he was in sympathy with the approach to graduate training, the dedication to economics, and the outstanding and committed faculty.

Once he settled in Chicago, he visited numerous Canadian universities and maintained close contact with Canada. In 1962 he became an important member of the staff of the Porter Royal

Commission on Banking and Finance. He published a book of collected articles, *The Canadian Quandary*, in 1963. Later, in 1972, he was one of three commissioned to survey the graduate economics departments of Ontario Universities--and was heavily critical. He had a complicated love-hate relationship with Canada. He acted like a resident when he was within Canada, freely criticizing everything within sight without the detachment of the visitor. He vigorously opposed Canadian protectionism and nationalism. He criticized Canadian economists for lack of professionalism and for pontification. But he went to great trouble to advise Canadian university economics departments and assist them with recruitment. He was generous in help to Canadian students and faculty struggling to get on abroad. He was offered many positions in Canada and obtained many honours.

In 1966 he joined to his Chair at Chicago a professorship at the London School of Economics, spending a quarter of each year in London and half in Chicago. He was recruited to build up a postgraduate school in economics on US lines, and in fact wanted to convert the economics department into a purely graduate school. But eventually he concluded that there was neither money nor enthusiasm for his project. Changes in UK tax laws, as well as his stroke, also played a role in his decision to give up his LSE position in 1974.

He had a severe stroke in the autumn of 1973 but, despite physical incapacity from which he never fully recovered, did not reduce the extraordinary amount of work which he undertook. In 1976 he became professor of international economics at the Graduate Institute of International Studies of the University of Geneva while continuing to perform his regular duties at Chicago.

Johnson published about 500 academic papers and fifteen

books, tackling an incredible variety of theoretical and current policy topics. His writings on social questions, economics and universities, income distribution and poverty, the Keynesian revolution, and other topics, were collected in *On Economics and Society* (1976). His writings were full of original insights, though these were not always developed in depth.

Apart from trade theory and policy, Johnson's great interest was in monetary theory, stimulated by his Chicago environment. He was not a "monetarist" in the Milton Friedman sense, but in Britain, he played a key role in bringing monetary factors back into theory and policy discussion. In the sixties he wrote several extremely influential surveys of monetary economics. These were brilliantly synthetic with remarkable historical perspective. His most famous paper in this field was "The Keynesian Revolution and the Monetarist Counter-revolution" (1971). All these, and many other papers on macro and monetary economics, were reprinted in *Essays in Monetary Economics* (1967) and *Further Essays in Monetary Economics* (1972). In his last years he became a prolific writer on, and enthusiastic advocate of, the monetary approach to the balance of payments. Here he departed from the more judicious and skeptical approach to various theories of his earlier years.

Johnson was indeed "a master of creative synthesis." A widely read book was *Economic Policies towards Less Developed Countries* (1967). Here, characteristically, magpie-like, he picked up bits and pieces of the latest relevant research and adapted and fitted it all into a coherent framework. His many surveys in trade theory, monetary economics and, to a lesser extent, other fields were highly influential in guiding the development of academic economics for over twenty years. No student reading list was complete without Johnson surveys. In a

sense, apart from his original contributions, he was a historian of current and very recent economic thought.

Harry--as Johnson was universally known--was an inveterate conference goer. In addition he visited innumerable universities, especially in Canada and in Asia. He "circled the globe like a planet." This traveling style began in the fifties when he was teaching refresher courses for economists in Karachi and Singapore. His traveling and ubiquitousness became legendary.

Among his many activities, his role as editor took much of his energy. At Cambridge, Manchester, and the LSE he edited or jointly edited journals, but his most important role was the editorship of Chicago's *Journal of Political Economy*, which he edited from 1960 to 1966 and jointly from 1969 until his death, and which he turned into the best edited academic economics journal in the world.

Johnson interacted with a vast number of economists, and his contributions to economics, especially international economics, go well beyond the work published under his name. He must be given some credit for numerous important articles published over a period of more than 20 years, mostly in the journals which he edited. He had the remarkable ability to guide numerous authors in fruitful directions. He was able to see a contribution--however apparently narrow in the perspective of the whole field--and in the light of the scientific development (as he would put it) of the subject. He played a key communication role in the field of international economics in particular, ensuring that the paper that one potential author had been drafting took into account the unpublished ideas of another in a far away place. This was an important byproduct of his traveling and conference going. The greatest crime in his eyes was to

fail to acknowledge adequately. He was thus: a "builder of intellectual bridges . . . a broker of ideas." He acted as a one-man employment agency for young economists. His circle was worldwide and in no sense institution-bound. In this respect, as in his writings, he was the complete internationalist.

Johnson had a concept of the economics profession using a scientific approach, steadily advancing knowledge, each little contribution building on the professional heritage. Indeed, *professional* was a key word in his vocabulary. He wanted economics to be a science cumulative in knowledge. He was a complex character, both fierce in debate and kind in personal relationships. He was forthright in criticisms and intolerant--perhaps unduly so in the views of some--of what he believed to be error, pretentiousness or pomposity, or an unscholarly failure to take into account previous work on a subject. But he had a highly developed conscience, and was almost puritan in his sense of responsibility to "the profession," and especially its younger members. He was a missionary. He believed in the rightness of his task--to improve economics and spread its light.

In his early and very creative years he was certainly a builder of theoretical models. In his later years he became impatient with what he regarded as the pursuit of arcane analytical problems and felt that the trend to mathematical theorizing was discrediting international trade theory in particular.

Johnson was a Fellow of the British Academy (1969), the Econometric Society (1972) and the Royal Society of Canada (1976), and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1976 he was named an Officer of the Order of

Canada. He was awarded an honorary D.Sc. by Manchester (1972) and an honorary D.Litt. by Sheffield (1969). He also was honorary LLD of St Francis Xavier, Windsor, Queen's, Carleton, and Western Ontario Universities in Canada. He served as President of the Canadian Political Science Association, Section F of the British Association, the Eastern Economic Association, as Vice President of the American Economic Association, and as Chairman of the Association of University Teachers of Economics in Britain. He was awarded the Innis-Gerin medal by the Royal Society of Canada, and the Bernhard Harms Prize by the University of Kiel.

While Johnson clearly had a powerful and surely lasting influence on his contemporaries, and, above all, on students worldwide, much of his writing was not of the kind that would be read or cited a great deal many years later. This applied inevitably to numerous surveys and synthetic or expository papers, and to critical essays on the views and writings of his contemporaries and analyses of current issues. Thus there is a contrast between his extraordinary impact, as measured by scholarly citations, during his lifetime, and the impact some twenty-two years later. His lasting influence in the field of macroeconomics rests on his pioneering paper, "Towards a General Theory of the Balance of Payments," published in 1958, and otherwise primarily on his contributions to the pure theory of trade and the theory of tariffs collected in *International Trade and Economic Growth* and *Aspects of the Theory of Tariffs*. As a contributor to pure trade theory and the theory of trade policy, he must be regarded as having had a very important place. His articles on trade and growth and on tariffs and "optimal intervention" have become classics.

Physically Johnson was a large man, overweight or at least stout, with piercing dark brown eyes. But he was far from

sluggish, and gave an impression of intense and disciplined intellectual and physical energy. He was often loudly and informally dressed. His energy was kept under control by his continuous carving of wooden statuettes, of which he made thousands in many different artistic styles. He carved at seminars and in his room, throughout the most concentrated discussions of intricate economic problems.

The enormous admiration and affection for Johnson was reflected in the numerous obituaries by members of the economics profession that appeared in 1977. "For the economics profession throughout the world, the third quarter of this century was an Age of Johnson." "He bestrode our discipline like a Colossus." "He was an institution." "Canada lost one of its greatest sons." He was "larger than life" (the most common remark). "The one and only Harry."

He married in 1948 Elizabeth Scott, daughter of Harold Victor Serson, civil engineer. She was one of the editors of the collected writings of Keynes. They had one son and one daughter. Harry Johnson died of a stroke in Geneva on May 9th 1977.

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