

## A. W. (Bob) Coats, 1924–2007

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Bob Coats was an exceptional scholar. His work covered a wide range of periods and places, from eighteenth-century Europe to the contemporary United States. Furthermore it spanned different disciplines—economic and social history, intellectual history, philosophy of science, and the sociology of knowledge. What makes him exceptional is the way he helped open new fields of research within these areas: the study of American economics, the professionalization of economics, and the recent internationalization of economics were all fields where his work dramatically broadened the agenda for subsequent scholars. Without work such as his, these fields would have been very different indeed.

Born Alfred William Coats, Bob, as he was always called, was one of a small but remarkable group of scholars whose work dominated the history of economic thought in Britain from roughly the 1970s to the 1990s (see Goodwin 2008). But while he was very much part of this group, there was a difference: he belonged not to an economics department but to a Department of Economic and Social History, which, in the British system, identified him as a historian rather than an economist. Yet, though

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he deprecated his qualifications as an economist, his interests were in economics as much as history, and he described himself (with typically excessive modesty) as a marginal member of the historians' guild. His attitudes were never constrained by disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, in that his publications took the form of articles, edited volumes, and two collections of his own papers, the structure of his CV looked much more like that of an economist than a historian.

One reason for this is that he had an inexhaustible desire to engage with other scholars. Send him a paper and a reply would come back—often with several pages of detailed hand-written comments (he never took to the word processor or e-mail). His letters did not just correct mistakes but they clearly showed the way his mind was responding to your work, encouraging further engagement. His observations could easily lead to new conclusions or modifications of previously held ones. This urge to engage with other scholars continued to the end of his life. He loved to travel and to meet new people and this continued as long as he was physically capable of doing so. The last time he attended the British History of Economic Thought conference, in Brighton in September 2007, he had a long list of people with whom he wanted to catch up. Illness did not eliminate the aim of completing the third volume of his collected papers, though in alliance with his high standards, it eventually stopped him from doing so.

## 1. Career

Bob's own explanation of this puzzling career, written as the introduction to the first volume of his collected papers (published in 1992 when he was 68, though far from the end of his career), goes back to his undergraduate education, disrupted by the Second World War. He had a year at the University of Exeter before entering the Royal Air Force, during which he continued his studies by correspondence course, making use of the British Council Library in Cairo. The first mention of economics in this reflection was when he wrote that his intention was to drop the subject in favor of English Literature. On the end of his military service, he returned to Exeter to complete his degree in eighteen months, graduating in 1948. He gave as his reason for returning to Exeter that LSE would take him only if he were willing to take their full three-year course. He graduated as an economist, albeit one who had taken papers in economic history as part of his degree, and proceeded to a highly unstructured master's degree that left him free



W. (Bob) Coats

to read widely in the “great books” of economics, eventually being examined on John Bates Clark. Bob offered no explanation of why he had made the very significant decision to study an American economist.

The next turning point was being offered an English Speaking Union Fellowship at the University of Pittsburgh for 1950–51. This was significant not simply as Bob’s first exposure to the United States, but because he encountered Bela Gold, who had come to economics after taking a degree in engineering and who was interested in bringing insights from both disciplines to bear on industrial problems. Bob took Gold’s classes in production economics, his seminar in industrial economics and, crucially, a seminar on social science research methods. This raised what Bob later

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described in the introduction to the first volume of his papers as “a host of searching and disquieting questions about the nature and significance of economics and the other social science disciplines.” Such questions preoccupied him for much of his career, but it was Gold who persuaded Bob to write his PhD dissertation, not on John Bates Clark, whom Gold did not find interesting, but on methodological controversies in American economics around 1900. This took him not only into methodology but also into Anglo-American comparisons and eventually comparative studies across many countries.

His doctoral thesis was not written in Pittsburgh, but at Johns Hopkins, where he held a Junior Assistantship from 1951–53. In addition to taking classes that increased his exposure to technical economics (he later recalled with gratitude “the generous C grade” that Carl Christ awarded him in mathematical economics), he attended the History of Ideas Club, established by Arthur O. Lovejoy in 1923. His supervisor was Fritz Machlup. But Bob claimed that Machlup, beyond instilling in him the importance of semantics, had much less influence on his thesis than the long-serving department chair, George Heberton Evans, like Gold a business economist and historian. The only economic history lectures he attended, however, were from T. S. Ashton, who was visiting Johns Hopkins, on England in the eighteenth century.

On the strength of a supportive reference from Ashton, Bob’s first academic post was as an assistant lecturer at the University of Nottingham, with promotion to a lectureship a year later. Apart from a year on a Rockefeller Fellowship (1958–59),<sup>1</sup> a year at the newly established University of York (U.K.) in 1963–64, where he was promoted to reader, numerous visiting positions in the United States,<sup>2</sup> and a summer at the University of Western Australia, he remained at Nottingham till he took early retirement, aged 58. When he returned from York to Nottingham in 1964 it was as professor and head of the department. His career at Nottingham reflects the fate of economic history as a discipline in Britain. In Britain, unlike in the United States, economic history had established an institutional presence that was distinct from both economics and history, in indepen-

1. During this year he met with Clarence Ayres, in Austin, Texas; studied Henry Carter Adams’s papers in Michigan; consulted the AEA papers at Northwestern; and visited Columbia.

2. Summer visits to Columbia (1962) and Wisconsin (1963 and 1964), and longer visits to the University of Virginia (1962–63), Stanford (fall 1967), Texas at Austin (fall 1978), and Emory (winter–spring 1979).

dent departments, and in the decades leading up to 1970, the subject experienced a remarkable expansion (see Coleman 1987, chap. 6). Bob came to Nottingham as this expansion was getting under way. His retirement was occasioned by the decision, in the wake of funding cuts, to merge his department with history, as happened in many universities in the 1980s and 1990s, a time when the number of posts in the subject shrank. It was while he was at Nottingham that he was involved in the moves by Bob Black (at Belfast) and Donald Winch (Sussex) to establish an institutional presence for the history of economic thought in Britain with the History of Economic Thought conference, the first of which was organized by Winch at Sussex in 1968, and the *History of Economic Thought Newsletter*.<sup>3</sup> He became even more heavily involved in the parallel activities in the United States—the History of Economics Society in 1973 and *HOPE*.

Early retirement did not mean retirement in what was then the conventional sense of the term. He held a fellowship at the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, from 1983–84, and in 1984 took a position as research professor at Duke University, becoming even more fully involved with *HOPE* and the historians of economics there, and teaching courses on slavery and the economic history of the American South. To allow both himself and his wife, Sonia, to follow their different careers, they began to spend half the year at Duke and the other half in Britain. That is, when Bob was not visiting Texas at Austin (1986), La Trobe (1987), Newcastle, Australia (1987), Victoria, British Columbia (1987), Alberta (1987), the Hebrew University (1988), São Paulo (1992), Wollongong (1994), and the Australian National University (1995). In many of these he taught courses on British and American economic history, the history of economic thought, and, increasingly, methodology. In 2001–3 he taught in Nottingham again, this time a final year module, *Explanation in Economics*, taught with the experimental economist, Chris Starmer. His CV also lists over one hundred universities in twenty-two countries, excluding those in which he had teaching appointments, where he gave occasional lectures and seminars, many of these being after his official retirement. Eventually, ill health forced him to slow down but he continued his academic work to the end of his life.

3. HET in the United Kingdom appears unique in having an annual conference and a newsletter but without having any formal society.

## 2. Historian of Anglo-American Economics

Bob developed an early interest in American economics, but this interest was always combined with three other themes that were to be characteristic of his work—the methodology of economics; the professionalization of economics; and international comparisons, particularly Anglo-American comparisons. As the title of his PhD thesis, “Methodological Controversy as an Approach to the History of American Economics, 1885–1930,” indicates, the work covered both the disputes between the “new school” of German-trained economists (including Richard T. Ely and Henry Carter Adams) and their “old school” opposition (including J. L. Laughlin, Simon Newcomb, and W. G. Sumner) that were concentrated in the 1880s and 1890s, and the later disputes between institutionalists, represented by Thorstein Veblen, Wesley C. Mitchell, and John R. Commons, among others, and their more “orthodox” critics that began in the 1890s and ran through to the early 1930s. The one direct offspring from his thesis work was his article “The Influence of Veblen’s Methodology” (1954), which argued that Veblen’s methodology, while influential among institutionalists, was both vague and incomplete and thus responsible for the heterogeneity of the institutionalist movement and its failure to produce a coherent evolutionary economics. In later essays on the history of American economics Bob continued to stress both the importance of institutionalism within that history *and* its theoretical weaknesses and failures. Bob’s other early paper, “The Historist Reaction in English Political Economy, 1870–90” (1954), provided a contrast to the American case. Historism in England, which he distinguished from German “historicism,” established economic history as a distinct area in English economics, but otherwise had a much smaller impact than in the United States.

Originally, Bob had planned to use his Rockefeller year (1958–59) to work on developing his thesis into a book. According to his autobiographical essay he abandoned this plan after having reread his thesis on the boat over and deciding that the work was too “divorced from the broader intellectual, social and cultural context,” an impression only reinforced by the research he conducted during that year in the Adams, Ely, and American Economic Association archives. Bob became interested in the history of the AEA; the development of official governmental roles for economists; the numerous academic freedom cases in the United States in the late 1800s; and, more generally, with the professionalization of economics as it took place in America—again in contrast to the British case. During his year in the States, Bob also met and inter-

viewed Clarence Ayres, Joseph Dorfman, and Walter Metzger. As he wrote in his autobiographical essay, he came away with the view that the “intensity and persistence of methodological controversy among American, as against British economists” was due less to any “epistemological preoccupations” among the former than to differences in “occupational security and cultural self-assurance.”

As a result of this experience, the 1960s were an immensely productive time for Bob. He wrote two papers dealing with the formation and early history of the AEA, in which R. T. Ely had a major role: “The First Two Decades of the American Economic Association” (1960) and “The American Economic Association, 1904–29” (1964). He published a paper in 1961 on the Political Economy Club, which preceded the AEA and was comprised mainly of “old school” economists; a paper in 1969 detailing the early publications of the AEA; a major paper in 1968 on the career of Henry Carter Adams as a case study of the professionalization of American economics; and in that decade several other pieces dealing with aspects of American scholarship in this period, among them “Democracy and Education: The American Experience” and “The Origins of the ‘Chicago School(s)’?” It should be noted here that Henry Carter Adams is a particularly interesting case. His movement from church to academia, his writing of a widely influential piece on the role of the state, his being the subject of an intellectual freedom case, and his becoming the chief statistician for the new Interstate Commerce Commission dealing with railroad accounting and regulation, all serve to make his career a particularly illuminating one in the history of American social science. Bob wrote a book-length study of Adams, for which he could not find a publisher.

Bob was always interested in contrasting the development of the economics profession in America with the path followed in England. These differences included the central, and highly authoritative, position of Marshall in English economics, for which there was no equivalent in the United States, and the much greater sense of continuity to be found in English economics. Bob’s work on this subject can be found in “The Role of Authority in the Development of British Economics” (1964), in articles on the Royal Economic Society, and in articles introducing unpublished correspondence between Ely and Marshall and unpublished correspondence of Marshall concerning the early development of the London School of Economics.

In later work, Bob not only returned to these themes but significantly expanded on them. On the topic of institutional economics, Bob wrote a

stream of book reviews. One of his most highly critical reviews was of Allan Gruchy's *Contemporary Economic Thought*, a review solicited and published by Warren Samuels in 1974 in the *Journal of Economic Issues*. This resulted in Gruchy's waging a long and bitter campaign to remove Samuels from the editorship of the *JEI*. Bob also contributed a chapter assessing Clarence Ayres's place in American economics to a commemorative volume, *Science and Ceremony* (Breit and Culbertson 1976), devoted to Ayres's institutionalism. Bob argued that while Ayres had attempted to provide a philosophical foundation for institutionalism, there was little evidence that the core ideas of Ayres's system—the instrumental (or technological) theory of value—was generating much interest among the many young economists expressing dissatisfaction with economic orthodoxy.

The paper on Ayres, it might be noted, is one of a comparatively small number of Bob's papers that focused on the work of one individual. For the most part his focus was on the profession. Bob's continuing work on this can be seen in his "Professionalization of American Social Science" (1978), "Culture and the Economists: Some Reflections on Anglo-American Differences" (1980), and his contribution to the centenary of the AEA, "The American Economic Association and the Economics Profession" (1985). The last of these discusses the role of the AEA in dealing with "certain problems arising in the professionalization process," including issues of non-partisanship, academic freedom, academic communication, proposals for certification of economists, and treatment of "heterodox" groups.

Bob's work discussed in this section is intimately related to his other research endeavors, especially his work on the sociology of knowledge and his various large projects dealing with the role of economists in government, the role of economists in international agencies, and the internationalization of economics. This work is discussed below, as it was both later in time and broader in scope than the material central to his work on Anglo-American economics.

### 3. Economic and Social Historian

Bob started his career as an economist concerned with methodological problems relating to economics in the age of John Bates Clark. He was trained by economists, albeit including Bela Gold and George Heberton Evans, two "old-fashioned" economists with an interest in business insti-



tutions and business history. His training, as well as his commitment to the history of economic thought, helps explain his feeling marginal to the economic history profession, though it does not mean his perception was correct. But this all makes it significant that, in the introduction to the second volume of his collected papers, he describes the volume as representing “an economic and social historian’s approach to the history of economics.” Where did this come from?

Clearly, Bob’s interest in economic history began as an undergraduate, his economic history course being the one course that he recalls taking, by correspondence, during the Second World War. He attributed his interest in eighteenth-century England to hearing T. S. Ashton’s lectures while studying at Johns Hopkins. However, his more systematic study of economic history would appear to have come, not from his postgraduate work, but from his early teaching experience at Nottingham, preparation for which took, as he put it, “considerable time.” There, he started out teaching *The Development of the World Economy, 1850–1950*, a standard course for those who took degrees in economic history during that era.<sup>4</sup> During this period he developed an interest in the relationship between economics and policy that resulted in his replacing this with a course on economic thought and policy, 1660–1848. Out of this emerged a series of articles. In 1958–60 he published articles on mercantilism, mid-eighteenth-century attitudes to labor, and eighteenth-century attitudes to the poor laws, in economic history journals (the *Scandinavian Economic History Review* and the *Economic History Review*). Another article from this period dealt with Adam Smith, but this was also aimed at historians, being published in *Renaissance and Modern Studies* in 1961. He also wrote about the importance of business records for the economic historian, perhaps reflecting the early influence of Gold and Evans.

As its title, “In Defence of Heckscher and the Idea of Mercantilism,” suggests, Bob’s first paper on mercantilism was a response to an ongoing debate, concerned not with uncovering new evidence but with reinterpreting the evidence that had been amassed by Eli Heckscher and others. Developing his ideas in this way, through responding to others, was typical of the way he worked. So too was his focus on the different perspectives to which historians, economists, and historians of economics would typically come to a problem. He presented his own perspective as

4. American readers need to be reminded that British degrees were much more specialized than American ones, students typically choosing their major as part of their initial application to university. Undergraduate teaching could therefore reach a more advanced level.

being that of the intellectual historian. He believed more than most historians that ideas were more important, concerned to find links between events and policies. But neither did he accept the economist's focus on the autonomous development of ideas: he believed that the mercantilists deserved more respect than most economists paid them. Mercantilism, as a topic involving politics, economics, and economic ideas, was ideal for bringing out these general issues. Another theme that proved important for his subsequent work was his concern with what happened to economic ideas as they were applied to policy. There was, however, a marked difference in approach. The mercantilist period had been the subject of extensive, detailed historical research, with the result that Bob's analysis and his historical insights relied very much on the research that had already been undertaken on unearthing the primary materials. In contrast, the projects he organized on the twentieth century, because they were concerned with opening up new fields, often involved establishing basic facts (such as how many economists were employed in government) and developing new frameworks within which the material could be analyzed.

These various concerns were linked. Bob largely accepted the conclusion that if attention is confined to economic policy, the idea of mercantilism is unhelpful: there is no body of policy enactments that can be fitted under this label. Where it might make sense to talk of mercantilism is at the level of economic doctrines. Though the relevant writings were pre-scientific and though events exerted a significant influence on policies, causing considerable variation across time and place, they were far from unsystematic. In the late-seventeenth-century literature on the East India Company, for example, he found it "striking," as he explained in the Heckscher essay, that certain "accepted maxims of trade" persisted "in the face of theoretical criticism and changing economic circumstances." Bob thus concluded that the important aspect of Heckscher's book was not that it answered but that it identified the questions that needed to be answered about how ideas and policy were linked. This conclusion was as much a criticism of traditional history of doctrine as of the refusal of historians to take ideas sufficiently seriously. Indeed, in his later writing, when he engaged more with historians of economics, his most critical remarks were directed against those who sought to read historical texts as they would read contemporary economics.

Around 1960 his interests began to move more squarely into intellectual history and the early history of the AEA, the result of the 1958 Ful-

bright scholarship that enabled him to supplement his thesis with more archival work in the United States.<sup>5</sup> In retrospect, despite his exposure to Arthur O. Lovejoy's intellectual history seminar at Johns Hopkins, he saw this year as a turning point in his attitude to the history of economic thought: this is when he began to view it, as he put it, from the viewpoint of an economic and social historian.

Bob's work on Anglo-American economics and the economics profession may have been legitimate work for an economic and social historian to undertake (T. S. Ashton encouraged it) but, as he acknowledged, it took him away from the mainstream of British economic history. Rather than continue the path toward becoming a leading authority on British economic history, he adopted a strategy of pursuing simultaneously his studies of Britain and the United States. As the path-breaking American work developed, and as his Anglo-American comparisons took him more firmly into the history of economic thought and circles dominated by economists, his contributions to British economic and social history inevitably became more sporadic. During the 1960s he published an article on the classical economists and the laborer in a volume on the industrial revolution edited by two historians. In the early 1970s he edited a volume, *The Classical Economists and Economic Policy*, and published "Contrary Moralities: Plebs, Paternalists, and Political Economists" in an influential historical journal (*Past and Present*); Bob engaged with leading historians, E. P. Thompson and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and he edited a multivolume collection of primary sources on poverty in the Victorian age, but it is clear that he was moving in other directions. His publications for the 1960s appeared mostly in economics journals and, from 1969, there was *HOPE*, to which he contributed the first article and with which he became heavily involved.<sup>6</sup> Thus, although he continued to write on classical economists and policy, and occasionally published papers in the proceedings of economic history conferences, he wrote about the subject primarily in places such as a book edited by an economist at the Institute of Economic Affairs, and in *HOPE* or publications marking the bicentenary of the *Wealth of Nations*. He had become a professional historian of economics (albeit with the perspective of an economic and social historian) rather than an economic and social historian who also had an interest in the history of ideas.

5. See footnote 1 above.

6. See section 4 below.

If Bob's published research took him away from the mainstream of economic history in the United Kingdom, the same cannot be said of the many PhD theses he supervised at Nottingham, or of his broader professional activities. The one that is probably most familiar to readers of *HOPE*, and closest to Bob's own interests in the history of economics, is that of John Maloney on the professionalization of economics in the late nineteenth century (which formed the basis for Maloney 1985). But more typical of theses he supervised were "The Agrarian Revolution in N. Nottinghamshire, 1750–1900" (A. C. Pickersgill), "The Derby Borough Development Committee, 1906–1933" (J. M. Bonsall), "A History of Trade Unionism in the Hosiery Industry from the 18th Century to the Present Day" (R. I. Gurnham), and "The Economic and Social Development of the Leicestershire and S. Derbyshire Coalfield, 1550–1914" (C. P. Griffin). "Harvest Technology and Labour Supply in Britain, 1790–1870" (E. J. T. Collins) involved both unearthing new historical data and applying economic concepts. "Origins of Enterprise: A Study of Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution" (K. Honeyman) fell squarely in the field of social history. He, together with Stanley Chapman, trained many of those who went on to staff Britain's economic history departments.<sup>7</sup> Given these interests, it is not surprising that he was a mainstay of the Midlands economic historians, and was close to business historians such as Peter Payne and Sidney Pollard.

#### 4. Establishing a Community of Historians of Economics

Early signs of a crisis looming in the history of economic thought appeared in the 1950s when Bob was still a graduate student in economics at Johns Hopkins University. By the end of the decade the subject seemed increasingly unwelcome at professional meetings and in the mainstream journals. Most troubling, several highly respected young scholars in the field were denied tenure in prominent economics departments, and the prospects for newly minted PhDs seemed dim. Even economic history, the subdiscipline most sympathetic toward the history of economic thought, was just entering the cliometric revolution and was growing increasingly

7. Others include Colin Griffin and Peter Payne. A complete list has not been found, though his CV states that he supervised twenty PhD and seven MA theses.

uncomfortable with its “literary” cousin, something of which Bob was very conscious.<sup>8</sup>

In response to the challenge presented to the history of economic thought within the economics discipline, conversations began on both sides of the Atlantic about what could be done and how to mount a counterattack against the growing “disrespect.” The objectives of the British and Americans were very similar but the strategy and style were rather different. In Britain improved networking and informal interaction were the main goals. The *HET Newsletter* was started by Bob Black, Bob Coats, and Donald Winch, and annual meetings, informal by American standards, began in 1968 with a conference organized by Winch at Sussex. Bernard Corry and Mark Blaug considered starting a journal but rejected the idea in part because it might lure the historians away from the mainstream of the discipline and justify the mainstream in excluding historians from its midst. The only substantial new publication that emerged from the ferment in Britain was a guide to archival resources for the history of economic thought in the United Kingdom, prepared by Paul Sturges but stimulated very much by Coats.<sup>9</sup> In North America, by contrast, geographical dispersion seemed to call for more structure and a society was formed in 1973. The first issue of the first journal in the field, *HOPE*, appeared in 1969, with a lead article by Bob. A second journal (*History of Economics Society Bulletin*, which later became the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*) was started later by the new society. It was determined that it was more important to direct available energies toward the actual collection of archival resources in North America than to the preparation of a North American guide, and the Economists Papers Project at Duke was a result.

By the 1960s Bob Coats was resolutely transatlantic, and he became distinctive by taking an active part in promoting and contributing to developmental efforts in the history of economic thought in the United States as well as in Britain. In addition to his extensive efforts in Britain, he was the first non-North American to be elected president of the History of Economics Society (1986), he was elected a Distinguished Fellow of the

8. When Bob met Craufurd Goodwin for the first time at an Economic History Association meeting in 1958, both were delighted to find a kindred spirit as they recognized the cool reception for their subject all around them.

9. On 12 October 1966, Bob wrote to Donald Winch seeking advice on a directory of “unpublished manuscripts.”

HES in 1996, and he was a founding member of the board of *HOPE*. From 1991 until 1994 he was an associate editor of *HOPE* while he held a part-time appointment at Duke. His influence on the journal was mainly as a frequent referee. He read a total of 340 papers for *HOPE* from 1968 through 2002, nearly one a month and almost 10 percent of the nearly 4,000 that have been received and refereed to date. This is a record unlikely to be equalled or exceeded by anyone any time soon. All referee correspondence received by *HOPE*, whether pertaining to rejected or accepted papers, is placed in the Special Collections Library at Duke. This means that there are close to one thousand pages of comment from Coats over more than three decades, telling us as much about the referee and his views about the field in general as about the papers under review. (Referee reports are, when used judiciously, an exceptionally rich resource for the study of the history of the history of economic thought.)

Why did *HOPE* use Bob so much as a referee? Memory and a selective rereading of his reports suggest several reasons. First, he was remarkably eclectic in his tastes and amazingly widely read in the literature. He could comment knowledgeably on the mercantilists, the classical economists, American economics, British economics, the sociology and philosophy of economics, and the place of economists in government. His interest in these areas, and others, waxed and waned but he seldom put one totally aside. Many authors must have felt embarrassment to receive an anonymous report from Bob with a literature review of their subject much more thorough and penetrating than that contained in their paper. Second, although he was fearless about entering new areas of inquiry, stimulated sometimes by a paper to evaluate, he was always quick to say if he felt he was not competent to act as judge in particular cases. Third, he was prompt and reliable, qualities dearly beloved of editors as well as of authors. Fourth, he was firm but constructive in his appraisals. He always wrote a report suitable to be passed along to the author. *HOPE* has had from the start a policy of allowing authors to “face their accusers” rather than producing for the authors sugar-coated summaries. Bob’s reports fitted well with this policy. He was concerned above all to help an author improve a manuscript; if he was critical he made clear why. Fifth, he was a tough but fair grader. Of the 340 papers he was sent for evaluation, he recommended that 57 be accepted outright and 159 be rejected. He returned 39 as beyond his competence and recommended serious revision of 85, usually with guidance as to how this should be done. This reflects a balance in the disposition of papers very close to that made by the journal overall during its existence.

What other reflections are stimulated by a perusal of the voluminous Coats correspondence with *HOPE*? His love for travel and new scenery stands out. His referee cards contain a string of address changes: always Nottingham as home base, but then Rhode Island, Atlanta, Western Australia, New South Wales, the Netherlands, Texas, British Columbia, and many more. He was always upbeat and optimistic; very little whining ever. He was endlessly curious and anxious to connect with young scholars so that he could see what was happening on the intellectual frontier. He was comfortable with a wide range of people, from senior political figures to big shots in economics and leaders of other disciplines.

### **5. Policy Making and the Sociology of the Modern Economics Profession**

Bob long had an interest in the sociology of economics, much of his work on American and British economics in the nineteenth century and earlier having been concerned with this, as parts 1 and 2 of the second volume of his collected essays clearly show. However, the first History of Economic Thought conference at Sussex marked a turning point in the style and coverage of Bob's research, toward exploring the role of economists in government from the Second World War onward, from where he went on to a series of collaborative international comparative projects on the modern economics profession. The first of these started from his own work on the role of economists in the British and Dutch governments, which he described, in a 12 March 1973 letter to Lionel Robbins, as "a by-product of that meeting."<sup>10</sup> The British side was financed for several years by the SSRC (which later became the ESRC) and involved a research assistant (Alan Booth) working in London to access government papers, covered by the Official Secrets Act. The Dutch side, which arose, in 1973, out of a fellowship that Bob held at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, was funded by the Dutch research organization, ZWO, and the Ford Foundation, and it also involved a research assistant, Marie Bemelmans-Videc. One part of this research involved the idea, possibly suggested by Alec Cairncross or John Jewkes,<sup>11</sup> of bringing together all the economists who had been head of the Government Economic Service, since

10. The sense in which it was a by-product is not made clear.

11. Cairncross is the likely suspect, but there is one letter in Bob's papers from March 1972 suggesting it might have been Jewkes.

its beginning in 1941, something that was then still possible. Thus in April 1973, at the Reform Club in London, there took place a dinner at which Lionel Robbins, James Meade, Robert Hall, John Jewkes, Alec Cairncross, and Douglas MacDougall discussed their experiences. It is perhaps worth noting that Robbins initially declined to come, on the grounds that he had already said what he had to say in his autobiography, but Bob persuaded him that the point was to foster discussion between those who had held this position at different times. The discussion was recorded and transcribed, but not published, though it no doubt fed into Bob's research.

In 1973 Bob published a short piece in the *HET Newsletter* outlining this project and its importance. Though much had been published on economists in government, he argued that there was a dearth of *systematic* research on the subject. "Unsystematic" research included the memoirs of those who had worked in government, such as Robbins. The questions he argued needed to be answered included finding out the skills that economists brought to bear on policy making, the extent to which economists constituted a quasi-autonomous professional group, and the influence on government economists of factors within and without the discipline. The questions that most concerned him, though, were what governments wanted from the economists they employed, and how they communicated with others in the administrative hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> He ended with a cry for help.

A year after the Reform Club dinner Bob organized, with Alec Cairncross, an international conference in Royaumont, near Paris, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, bringing together experienced policy makers from six countries. He had plans to publish the proceedings but despite negotiations with several publishers, including discussion of publishing it in *HOPE* and with Duke University Press, these came to nothing. In November 1976 he described the process of finding a publisher as "dispiriting" in a letter seeking advice about publication from the SSRC. However, assisted by the Ford Foundation, Bob organized two further conferences, the first in Bellagio in 1977 and the second in Dubrovnik. These differed in approach. Whereas bringing together policy makers had helped define the questions that needed to be asked (and of course provide much information), in these conferences he turned to academics

12. His research assistant, Alan Booth, recalls these being the key questions Bob would pose when he met him once a fortnight at the Treasury.



who would undertake research rather than practitioners who would reflect on their experiences.<sup>13</sup> Substantial fees (\$900) were paid to contributors. As he wrote in a draft proposal to the Ford Foundation, “It is only Americans who expect large sums for such purposes. However we are prepared to adopt American standards where appropriate.”<sup>14</sup> The results were published as *Economists in Government: An International Comparative Study* (1981).

His next two projects followed up some suggestions made while he had been preparing for this conference. As items in Bob’s papers show, in November 1974 Craufurd Goodwin had suggested that he bring in less developed countries, and several months later David Bell, a senior officer of the Ford Foundation, had offered to Bob the following criticism of his project.

The framework is almost exclusively national—how economists relate to their own governments. Would it not be appropriate to recognize that in today’s world government economists do a lot of international work, and to bring that aspect of their involvement into prominence? I have in mind such things as the OECD committees at which economists from various governments explain (and defend) their governments’ policies, GATT and other tariff negotiations, etc, etc.

Whether stimulated by this remark or not, Bob’s second project focused on exactly this topic: the role of economists in international agencies. Again, he started with a conference, this time in Washington, D.C., in December 1983, at which were presented papers by economists with long experience of working in the IMF, the World Bank, GATT, the OECD, and the United Nations. The proceedings were published as *The Role of Economists in International Agencies: An Exploratory Study* (1986).

Bob’s projects took a different turn in the 1990s, when he conceived the idea of investigating the internationalization of the economics profession, turning to academic economics as well as economists in government. As before, this took the form of a series of meetings, though this

13. Participants at Bellagio included S. Ambirajan, William J. Barber, Trond Bergh, Franco Ferraresi, Paulo Roberto Haddad, Egon Kemeses, Ryutaro Komiya, A. Petridis, Craufurd Goodwin (then at the Ford Foundation), and Coats.

14. Given that he had complained that it was difficult to find people prepared to commit to undertaking research, perhaps this shows that he had learned from the subject he was studying, but to which he claimed to be an outsider. A condition for payment was that papers were circulated some weeks before the conference.

time sessions at HES meetings, where preliminary papers were presented so as to set the agenda for those contributions that had not yet been written. He exerted pressure on contributors to address common themes and to find ways to undertake statistical analysis. Over a period of years he agonized over whether the process under investigation should be called “internationalization” or “Americanization,” his preferred title till near the end being “the international spread of American-style professional economics.” It was eventually published in 1997 under the title *The Post-1945 Internationalization of Economics*. Though the United States was clearly central, the papers covered several continents: Britain, Australia, India, Japan, and Brazil. There was also an attempt to tie it in with previous projects through papers (by eminent practitioners) on the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It was followed up shortly afterward (after a conference of course) with a volume in 2000 that sought systematically to cover Western Europe.

Bob was not the first to organize themed academic conferences. However, he developed this method as a way of coordinating research, developing the questions, selecting participants, and trying to develop methods that would answer the questions he had posed. He had been involved, with R. D. Collison Black and Craufurd Goodwin, in organizing the conference on the marginal revolution, at Bellagio in 1971, the papers from which appeared in *HOPE* and as a book. With his projects on economists in government and, later, internationalization, he developed the technique of holding a small preliminary meeting to thrash out questions and methods, prior to the final meeting at which the final papers would be developed. It was a method that reflected his own passion for engagement with other people and their ideas. Throughout these projects, the questions that he posed related to the sociology of the profession, contributing to the opening up of that field.

## 6. Methodology

Though Bob’s interest in methodology dated back to his dissertation days, professional interest in the area among historians of economic thought began to pick up in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At least part of the impetus was changes that were occurring within the philosophy of science, where the influence of positivism (or logical empiricism) was waning. Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, and Imre Lakatos were offering alternative accounts to the “received view,” each with varying emphases on

description and prescription. In the mid-1970s new voices were added, as philosophers of science like Alex Rosenberg and Daniel Hausman began to analyze the structure and nature of theorizing in economics. By the 1980s journals like *Economics and Philosophy* and *Methodus* (later the *Journal of Economic Methodology*) began publication, and books and articles by economists writing about issues in methodology began appearing with increasing frequency.

Bob participated in the renaissance of methodology in a variety of ways. In the first instance he was a trend-spotter, or, at times, a path-breaker. Thus though he was not the first to introduce Thomas Kuhn's work to economists (he generously pointed out in his own article that Gordon 1965 took precedence), he was the first explicitly to put the question, "Is there a 'structure of scientific revolutions' in economics?" Though appreciative of the fact that Kuhn had provided an important new way to think about the development and nature of the scientific enterprise, Bob did not think that Kuhn's framework could be readily applied to economics. (The Keynesian revolution was the only episode that he thought fitted Kuhn's framework.) He was far more receptive to the potential applicability of Imre Lakatos's "methodology of scientific research programs" to economics, and again he recognized its importance early on. In 1972 Spiro Latsis, writing in a philosophy journal, had been the first to apply Lakatos's approach to an area of economics, the theory of the firm. Bob was among the first (the other commentator was Fritz Machlup) to comment on Latsis's paper and the applicability of the Lakatosian framework. Noting that Latsis's treatment was philosophical rather than historical, Bob thought that the Lakatosian framework could be useful in understanding certain historical episodes in economics, and offered as a brief example the early development of consumer choice theory in the United States.

He developed that example in much more detail in perhaps his most important methodological contribution, "Economics and Psychology: The Death and Resurrection of a Research Programme" (1976). The paper appeared in a book edited by Latsis and containing papers from a conference that specifically attempted to address the relevance of Lakatos's and Kuhn's work for economics. In his paper Bob traced the turn-of-the-century American debates over the relevance of psychology to the theory of choice, and offered a "rational reconstruction" of the "hard cores" and "positive heuristics" of the two major rival approaches. Bob's understanding of history of both British and American economics of the period enabled him to give an account that was historically insightful into the

decline of psychology in economics as well as creating an exemplary Lakatosian reconstruction. This sort of work would be replicated by many others as the decade progressed, reaching its culmination perhaps in Mark Blaug's book, *The Methodology of Economics* (1980), the last third of which is given over to the reconstruction and assessment of various areas of economics along Lakatosian lines. But Bob's study was the first.

Another role that Bob played in the advancement of methodology was the prosaic but essential one of review writer. He wrote two major review articles, one published in *Kyklos* in 1982 that treated books by Mark Blaug, Homa Katouzian, and Ian Stewart, and another in 1986, also in *Kyklos*, that reviewed collections of articles edited by Bruce Caldwell, Daniel Hausman, Alfred Eichner, Peter Wiles, and Guy Routh, as well as a book by J. J. Klant. Two things stand out in the reviews. First, though Bob would of course offer penetrating assessments of the books under review, he also provided footnote citations to many other books and articles that spoke to whatever issue was at hand. His reviews were guides to the books under review, but they had the additional virtue of positioning those books within the wider literature. Second, it is clear from his responses to the books that he saw increased understanding and better communication to be the main goals of methodological work. As a result, he had little patience for writers whose principal use for methodology was as a cudgel to bash mainstream economics.

Another role was that of critical commentator on a particular position. The chief example here is Bob's reaction to Deirdre McCloskey's "rhetoric of economics" approach, a topic on which he wrote three times, in 1984 (with Bruce Caldwell), 1987, and 1988. As might be expected, Bob was not sympathetic. As he made clear in the 1987 article, he did not take well to McCloskey's "exaggerated and misdirected attack on economic methodology," that is, McCloskey's claim that all methodology was modernist and prescriptivist, and that the advent of the rhetorical approach meant the end of methodology. He viewed the study of economic rhetoric "as subordinate to the study of its intellectual content and the social and historical context in which it occurs." Bob thought that the rhetorical approach could benefit from integration with sociological work on the intellectual and social organization of science, and in this regard was a frequent promoter of the investigations that had been done by the sociologist Richard Whitley, especially Whitley 1984.

Bob's final role was to offer assessments of the contributions of various individuals to the methodological literature. He wrote appreciations for

Fritz Machlup, T. W. Hutchison, and Daniel Fusfeld, the most substantial of these being his masterful forty-two-page paper on Hutchison, published in 1983. There Bob traced the development of Hutchison's ideas, but he also put his subject squarely within the context of his times, detailing the work both of his sources and of his opponents. The title of the paper tells it all: "Half a Century of Methodological Controversy in Economics as Reflected in the Work of T. W. Hutchison."

If anyone ever wanted to provide an historical account of the growth of interest in methodological thought that took place within economics in the second half of the twentieth century, or of the methodological debates that informed the period, the person would be well advised simply to study Bob Coats's articles, not neglecting his footnotes. He was a player but also always a chronicler, and a fair-minded one at that.

## 7. Conclusion

Bob described himself as an "economist watcher." This role aptly sums up much of his work. It captures the variety of perspectives from which he looked at economics—as historian, as sociologist, and as methodologist. But he did not just "watch" economists. He engaged with them, perhaps best illustrated by his bringing prominent policy-advisers together to talk about their profession. This passion for engagement with others, reflected in the three hundred or so book reviews that he wrote, may be one reason, apart from his belief that it would raise productivity, for arguing that there was not enough joint authorship in the history of economics. It was not accidental that he considered conferences the way to get projects started and that he posed questions that were so large that collaborative work was a necessity.

He had a profound effect on the fields in which he worked, many of which were transformed or given new impetus by his work, and the breadth of his interests was such that few scholars will be able to appreciate the full picture. Much of his work, such as that on late-nineteenth-century American economics, has not been superseded. So much has been written on some of the fields he explored, including the study of the economics profession in the period since the Second World War, that it is hard to recall how much of an innovator he was. But what many of us will remember is not just his published work but the way he was always full of enthusiasm for new ideas, wanting to find out what we were doing and encouraging us to think in new ways and try new methods. His passion for engaging

with other people was infectious and his comments and advice could change the direction of other people's research. This method of working made him many friends. He will be greatly missed.

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## Appendix 1:

### Selected Bibliography of A. W. (Bob) Coats

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