

Obituary

Ross McDonald Parish (1928–2001)



The year 2001 saw the loss of several giants of the Australian agricultural economics profession. They were leaders of the profession who had made significant contributions to the work of their colleagues and to the wider community. Ross Parish, who died on October 5, was one of those giants.

Parish pioneered the use, in Australia and more widely, of the tools of microeconomic theory to assess the social costs and benefits of a range of rural and other policies. Here was no ritualised number-cruncher; rather, we had an elegant manipulator of theoretical concepts to analyse real world problems. Both in his career and in his publications he illustrated the fact that agricultural economics is part of the seamless cloth of economics. His standing in the wider world of Australian economics was summarised by his long-time colleague, Jack Duloy, who said ‘Ross made microeconomics a respectable area of economic analysis in Australia’. In doing this, he, among other things, helped lay the foundations for the reforms in agricultural price policy of the last few decades.

In the *Economic Record* (1962) he published a classic paper on the social costs of dairying industry protection. Forty years later, this oft-cited, seminal paper continues to enjoy a firm place in the reading lists of Australian economics students. Several other Parish publications have achieved similar perennial status and often profoundly influenced the course of agricultural policy formation. His 1964 joint study with Jack Duloy, providing an appraisal of the proposed floor price scheme for wool, was one notable example. Sadly, although supported by several well-argued articles from them in contemporary rural newspapers and other periodicals, it served only to help delay by several years the adoption of the ill-fated floor price program, and not to prevent its eventual introduction.

Today, a scanning of his publication list reveals a strikingly extensive and disparate range of issues addressed. He had something very original and pertinent to say about matters as seemingly unrelated as airline timetables, competition in radio/TV programs, student loans versus grants and refundable deposits on bottles, as well as on core issues of agricultural marketing and price policy, product promotion, trade and international commodity agreements. His 1967 paper on price levelling and averaging predated by about 20 years interest in asymmetric information.

The common factor in many of his studies was that they were masterly applications of welfare economics to analyse, explain, evaluate or predict the consequences of past or proposed programs or courses of action. Parish was a virtuoso in the use of those schematic diagrams associated with price analysis, models of imperfect competition, international trade and other microeconomic fields. The variety of issues he addressed was his way of demonstrating the relevance of economics to business decisions and public policy. He thought well on his feet but, if persistence were necessary, would worry away at a problem until he cracked it. Although much of his published work was in the economics of agriculture, he was no narrow specialist in this branch of his discipline and his competence extended into broader dimensions of general economics.

A perceptive critic, quick to spot any flaws in arguments presented or any limitations in the analytical tools employed, he took a prominent and constructive role in staff seminars. Indeed, he functioned throughout his career as an in-house research consultant for departmental colleagues and was unstinting with his time in providing detailed comments or methodological advice.

As a teacher, his slightly dour, rigorous, questioning presentation, devoid of histrionics or pretension, might not always have appealed to beginner undergraduates or, at least, not to those expecting neat cookbook prescriptions, easy generalisations without qualification or dictated notes. However, many of those who took his senior year course in agricultural marketing at the University of New England (UNE) rated it the most rewarding and stimulating of their entire degree program. In his eulogy for Ross, Roley Piggott, a colleague at both New England and Monash, and a former student of Ross, said:

I have heard many of his former students comment to the effect that, whilst Ross's teaching method seemed unusual at the time, at the end of the day, his lectures had provided them with a great start to handling the problems of the real world. The secret to all this, of course, was that Ross understood economics so well that he could ...

choose the right practical examples to demonstrate particular points. *Not very many university lecturers have such a precious ability.* One way of summing up Ross's approach in the classroom would be to say that he didn't so much concentrate on teaching students economics, but rather on teaching students how to learn economics.

The son of a New South Wales North Coast dairy farmer and a graduate of Murwillumbah High School, Ross studied agricultural science, on a New South Wales Department of Agriculture traineeship, at the University of Sydney where he received his introduction to the discipline from Professor Keith Campbell. Less formally, his broader philosophical and political views were influenced, at that time, by association with the Free Thought Society, a body formed to discuss the teachings of the Philosopher John Anderson. This led to links with outstanding people from a range of disciplines and cultural interests. According to his long-time colleague, Geoff Hogbin, these associations 'broadened his interest in social and political issues and strongly influenced his thinking on the nature of personal freedom and the relationship between individuals and the state'.

As a youthful research officer in the NSW Division of Marketing and Agricultural Economics, Ross Parish had already, in the mid-1950s, attracted notice and displayed the early promise which he was to fulfil so amply in his subsequent career. Encouraged by Campbell, he wisely chose the University of Chicago for his postgraduate study. He was supported there by a Fulbright Travel Grant and a University of Chicago Fellowship and, later, by a Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship. At Chicago, he came under the influence of such renowned scholars as T.W. Schultz, D. Gale Johnson and Milton Friedman. PhD candidates at Chicago were often called on to put some empirical flesh on the theoretical bones articulated by their high-flying mentors. Ross's contribution was a study of the economics of summer fallowing in Canada and was a profound exercise in the economics of production and time. Not surprisingly, his time at Chicago strengthened the views on the individual in society and freedom of choice already developed at Sydney.

On his return to Australia, Ross took up an appointment as Senior Lecturer at the University of Sydney and then in 1964 as Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of New England. In 1966 he moved across the campus to a chair in the Faculty of Economics and in 1973 was appointed as Professor at Monash University where he remained until his retirement in 1993.

Parish successfully undertook a number of studies and investigations for international agencies invariably producing more substantial reports than might reasonably have been expected to emanate from a short-term

assignment. In one of these brief consultancies in Rome he produced for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization a thoughtful report on international commodity agreements. During the 1970s, he also undertook, for the World Bank, a mid-term evaluation of a rural development project in Mauritius.

He was involved in the work of the Centre for Independent Studies, an Australian body promoting reasoned analysis and impartial discussion of economic and public policy issues. He was an active supporter of the aims of this organisation and was a long serving member on its Council of Advisers and Honorary Research Director. He edited a number of the Centre's publications and, particularly significant in this respect, was his involvement with the production of the significant monograph by Sieper *Rationalizing Rustic Regulation*.

From the mid-1970s, Ross suffered from a debilitating illness that curbed his productivity but not his enthusiasm. In his last few months, dialysis was required which caused him to observe wryly that reporting in several times a week for treatment was like having a job to go to. The discomfort of this period was greatly eased by the loving care of his daughters who put an enormous effort into making the time as bearable as possible.

Ross Parish was a patient and tolerant man not given to expressing ill-will or anger (although sorely exasperated on one occasion by the stubborn casuistry of one mature student claiming to have demolished the Law of Diminishing Returns). His good taste and urbanity pervaded his every activity, while his gentle wit and ironic observations on life were never cruelly barbed nor shafted with malice. Above all, he was a man whose unfailing modesty and humility remained unchallenged throughout his life by his distinguished career and many achievements.

Such a man was Ross McDonald Parish! His former students, faculty colleagues and practitioners in agricultural economics throughout Australia and abroad, will have been saddened at his passing, but honoured to have been associated with such an admirable colleague. On behalf of the profession we express our condolences to his daughters.

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