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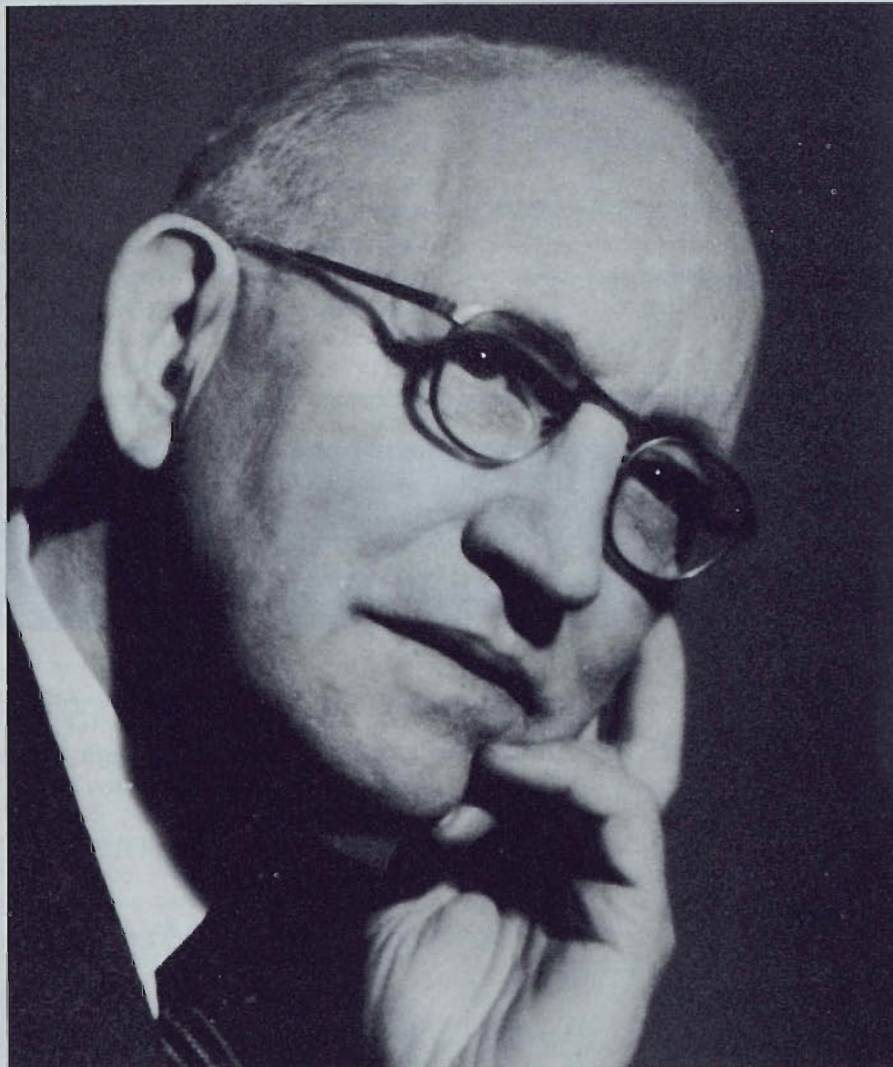
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*Remembering*  
**JOHN D. BLACK**

by Willard W. Cochrane



**J**ohn D. Black was one of the most prominent agricultural economists in the United States from the early 1920s to the middle 1950s. He profoundly influenced agricultural policy directly, and indirectly through his many outstanding students and through his effect on the agricultural economics profession. Few men have played such a dominant role in their profession for such a long period of time.

John Donald Black was born in a log cabin on a small Wisconsin farm in the year 1883. He was the fourth among ten children in a family that was poor in worldly goods but rich in educational experience. His mother had been a country school teacher and the family moved close to Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, in 1892 so that the children could attend high school. After completing high school, Black saved enough money to attend



Oshkosh Normal School for two years (1903-1905). He then taught high school algebra, botany, and geography and coached athletics for two years.

In 1907 he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin at Madison to work on a degree in English. After graduating from Wisconsin in 1909, Black remained at Madison another year to earn a Masters degree. That helped him decide that he did not want to do further graduate work in English.

And since other members of his family needed financial help with their education, Black returned to teaching rather than pursuing further graduate studies. He spent one year at Western Reserve University in Cleveland and four years at the School of Mines at Houghton, Michigan, teaching in English literature and composition. By this time he had become deeply interested in economic and social issues and often required fledgling engineers to write about economic and social questions in addition to technical matters.

## A Move to Economics

In the fall of 1915, Black, now 32 years old, returned to the University of Wisconsin to work on a doctorate in economics. He credited H.C. Taylor with getting him interested in agricultural economics. Of all his teachers in economics, John R. Commons impressed him most. But he never became a slavish follower of Commons and the Wisconsin School of Institutionalists. For his economic content he turned primarily to Alfred Marshall and John Bates Clark. Armed with a fresh Ph.D., a doctoral thesis on "Land Tenure in Wisconsin" and strong recommendations from his Wisconsin professors, Black took his first professional job in economics at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1918.

## At Minnesota

John D. became acting head of the Division of Agricultural Economics immediately. This occurred because the only other member of the staff of the Division (farm management teaching and research was in the Division of Agronomy) was on leave during the year 1918-1919. Black never looked back. He increased the budget of the Division some 600 percent in nine years (how remains a mystery) and added such men as C. L. Holmes, H. B. Price, Holbrook Working, Warren Waite, and A. G. Black to the faculty.

The story is the same with respect to graduate student numbers. Within a few years, more graduate students were part of Black's department than in any other department on the St. Paul campus and many went on to become leaders in the field over the next 25 years. New graduate courses and seminars were added for topics now considered the principal subdivisions of

agricultural economics. By 1927, undergraduate enrollment had so mushroomed that agricultural economics had become one of the most popular majors on the campus.

Thus, within a few short years he took a college department that, for practical purposes, existed in name only to one of the best in the nation.

## To The Ivy League

Black resigned his position of Chief of the Division of Agricultural Economics at the University of Minnesota in September 1927 to accept a professorship at Harvard. This new position presented Black with a stiff challenge; at Harvard he had no students. Few undergraduates were interested in the problems of agriculture, and graduates, for the most part, were there to study economic theory and related theoretical subjects.

Though undergraduate instruction in agricultural economics never became an important part of Black's work at Harvard, soon graduate students were flocking to Harvard to study with him. Out of 120 fellowships granted by the Social Science Research Council to study agricultural economics and rural sociology, 45 of the recipients came to Harvard. "Black's boys" was

a term used both in derision and envy when I was at Harvard in 1941-42—derision because many of "Black's boys" were not well prepared in economic theory and mathematics, but envy, because there were so many of them, and they were, relatively speaking, so well financed.

## The Washington Connection

During the depression years of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s, Black traveled to Washington almost weekly—consulting, attending meetings, and speaking at conferences. He also took on a number of studies ranging from major undertakings like *Three Years of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration* with Edwin Nourse and Joseph Davis to "quickie" studies of specific programmatic problems. Thus, he had direct impact on the programs of the depression agencies and on the World War II economic agencies. His indirect influence, however, through his studies and proteges was probably even greater. Black's men were everywhere in the government including top level officials such as J. K. Galbraith and Sherman Johnson and insightful analysts such as Patrick O'Donnell and Catherine Corson.

For these and other accomplishments (including a publication list that fills 21 printed pages) Black was elected president of the American Farm Economic Association in 1932, Fellow of the AAEA in 1957, and president of the American Economic Association in 1955. His book *Introduction to Production Economics* (1926), opened up the field of production economics. His book, *Agricultural Reform in the United States* (1929), summarized the policy debates of the 1920s and helped to create a workable AAA program in 1933 by sorting out policy ideas that had some chance of working from those that did not. Finally, the book *Farm Management* (1947), co-authored with Marion Clausen, C. R. Sayre, and Walter W. Wilcox, is a good example of how John D. continued to collaborate with his former students.

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John D. officially retired from his Harvard professorship in 1956, but in fact he never retired—he just slowed down a bit. As late as 1959 he could still be found in his office meeting with students or out-of-town visitors. He died on April 12, 1960.

### Three Attributes

The successful career of John D. Black cannot be explained by a single attribute or causative element. There are three which explain—at least for me—the man's success if not the man himself.

First, he was an indefatigable worker. Work for John D. was as natural as breathing—you did it regularly and all the time.

Second, he was a great teacher. Not a scintillating lecturer; his greatness lay in his leadership qualities, particularly with reference to graduate students. He helped many students find the financing both to start graduate work and to complete it. In counseling students, he advised them to gain a wide educational experience including exposure to many and varied economic ideas. He did not try to create a Black or a Harvard school of agricultural economics. He helped match students with thesis topics that fitted their experience and capabilities and he did so with an eye toward building the fund of knowledge in the field, or fields, involved. He encouraged, yes, pushed, his students to complete their formal training and get on with their professional careers. And he often worked with his students, after they had completed their degrees, on cooperative projects that enhanced the students' reputations, as well as John D.'s, and made important contributions to social welfare.

Third, Black was problem oriented. His research approach was to identify problems—in this case economic problems in the food

and agricultural sector—and then attack them. He attacked a problem with whatever economic tools he had at hand and with a large portion of common sense. He did not wait for the discipline to develop new or better tools; nor did he expect perfect solutions.

I don't believe he thought there were perfect solutions to socioeconomic problems; he was too wise for such a simplistic view. His goal was to reduce a social or economic problem to a state that was acceptable to society and thereby improve social welfare.

The betterment of social welfare was indeed the driving force behind all his work, from teaching to research to advising to counseling.

J. K. Galbraith says it best: Students recognized that Black's norm in economics was a firm concept of social welfare which he rarely, if ever, paused to define, but from which he never deviated; and they realized that his norm in economic method was how well the technique contributed in a practical and visible way to practical problems of welfare.

John D. did not spend a lifetime searching for eternal truths or basic economic laws. He dealt in the very real problems of his time—how to identify them, how to analyze them, and how to cope with them. For example, he was concerned with making the AAA in the 1930s a more effective program, how to get more food production in the World War II period, and how to make the County Land Use Planning Program in the late 1940s more acceptable—hence an effective planning instrument.

As a result, much of Black's work is considered dated and is rarely studied in the late 1980s. But we could certainly use some of "Black's boys" in agricultural economics today to help deal with the very real problems of agriculture in the late 20th century. **C**

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