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## How I Became an Agricultural Economist

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This will not be a profound or learned address; the talk is personal - hence its title. I agree to tell it only because I am proud of some of the events in which I tried to play a creative role. What I call *The Tale* is a part of the story of the development of agricultural economics in Australian universities and, not least, of the establishment of the BAE in Canberra, in all of which there were many others involved, including such people as Professor Wadham (Melbourne), Professor Watt (Sydney), Mr McKerihan (Rural Bank of N.S.W.) and Dr Ian Clunies Ross (CSIR). My own personal interest and involvement in agricultural economics grew almost as the result of a series of sometimes quite unrelated steps - some more important than others. Indeed, if this story is any guide, one could develop a theory of history as a series of accidental events!

Let me mention those steps which, I hope, will emphasise the importance of events in one's life - some chance, some of more deliberate intent - and which not merely led me into agricultural economics, but also played some considerable part in the establishment of the BAE.

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### *The Tale*

I was not a farm boy, but did spend some holidays with farming uncles in the Wellington-Dubbo area and with farming friends in the north-west of N.S.W., most notably Mr A. Heath of Curlewis.



My real dreams were frustrated. Not having been warned, I did no Latin and hence, under the matriculation rules of 1928, could not become a doctor or a lawyer - my two dreams! But all was not lost: at Sydney High I had "done" economics (= Cannan: *Wealth*) and was very impressed by two points:

Even Robinson Crusoe had to allocate his time between competing ends; and

Malthus' use of the law of diminishing returns and Cannan's stress on productivity as a solution (not to mention new lands!).

The problem of population pressure has plagued me all my working life (and I am afraid my later classes got a lot of this with India, as the greatest single case for Malthusians to study, thrown in for good measure!).

After school I became a clerk in the N.S.W. Crown Solicitor's Office - hardly fertile ground for a budding economist. But, despite my environment, I maintained my determination to do the B.Ec. as an evening student in four years. My horizons were widened by the B.Ec. course under the guidance of Professor Mills, H.D. Black and R.B. Madgwick. However, Malthus would not go away and, as I have indicated, he remained at the core of much of my professional life. A large part of my later work with the World Bank in the 1960s and '70s was again with India, but Africa also provided much field material.

The next big step (I omit a significant period (1932-3) of teaching in Temora) was the award to me of the Walter and Eliza Hall Economics Research Fellowship at Sydney University. Alas!, I took on the rather sterile research task of measuring *tariff levels*. (I shall not dally on this terrible mistake, but the work is available to anyone interested in economic history.)

*The real challenge* occurred during my tenure of the Fellowship:

Memo: Mills to Crawford - "Prof Watt wants agricultural economics in his Faculty [Agriculture]: go and give it!"

I did, in 1934 I think, and easily the best result by 1941 was K.O. Campbell - who didn't need *my* help to get his First. I am afraid the course was elementary first-year economics - again with Malthus thrown in, but plus at last some real farm examples provided by the Rural Bank.

In December 1935, I joined the Rural Bank as Economic Adviser. Here I developed a close relationship with the Bank's valuers - a highly competent group who taught me much in the field of farm management analysis.

Then came for me the big opportunity, challenge and experience: a Commonwealth Fund Service Fellowship to the U.S.A! This was an award made by the New York-based Harbison Foundation (called the Commonwealth Fund)\* amongst whose awards were five for public servants in British dominions. The award provided:

nine months in the United States Department of Agriculture as a *de facto* member of BAE!! (My nominal base was the Brookings Institute, but a letter of introduction to Harry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, gave me a much more stimulating base for the study of agricultural economics.);

five-six months' travel by car in the Great Plains of the U.S.A. - observing the "New Deal" at work, the savage foreclosure policies of insurance companies, and the activities of county agents;

some six-eight months at Harvard as "Visiting Scholar". (There I had the good fortune to work with Alvin Hansen and John D. Black and Ken Galbraith. There too my first, rather tactless, contribution was to correct J.D. Black on an egregious error in his measurement of the "size of farms" in Australia.)

As a result of these experiences, I became strongly convinced that agricultural economics had a rightful and needed place in Australian universities, and that there should be an Australian BAE.

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\* I am glad to say that Tom Strong, Jack Lewis and Paul Phillips later followed my footsteps in this respect.

I came back to War, still in its more or less "phoney" stage, in 1940 and, in 1941, joined the Division of Agricultural Economics in the N.S.W. Department of Agriculture. I would like to note here that the N.S.W. Government (via both political parties), alone of the Australian states, was a constant seeker of Commonwealth cooperation and leadership in agricultural economic studies. Nor were the two Premiers concerned (Mair and McKell) idle in developing the subject.

In 1942 came War Organisation and Industry, followed by Postwar Reconstruction and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics - formally recognised as such by Mr Reg Pollard in 1944 in spite of opposition from the Commonwealth Department of Commerce and Agriculture and from Treasury. Both, together with the Public Service Board, preferred either "Division of Marketing" or "Division of Agricultural Economics".

In 1950 McEwen moved for an "Independent Cost Finding Tribunal". I helped him discover, however, the importance of the BAE and the fact that his Tribunal *de facto* existed. The BAE survived.

I became Secretary of the Department of Commerce and Agriculture in 1950 and moved to the Department of Trade in January 1956. I left the Service in 1960 and, in more or less related fields both here and abroad, have been wandering ever since. During those wanderings, however, the most fruitful and challenging work I did was in the capacity of Adviser (mainly for India), then of Senior Adviser on Agricultural Policy, to the World Bank.

It will not now surprise you that I found Malthus and Cannan much illuminated in the course of my visits in the field.

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Many of you will notice that in this race through my life I have skipped certain events and people of great importance, one of whom was Ian Clunies Ross, a strong supporter of the BAE. He was quite open about its location, only wanting it to be in a position to influence both agricultural research *and* government policy.

There was a considerable controversy as to where the



BAE should be located. A strong case existed for the University of New England, but the advantages of being near the seat of power won the day. Nevertheless, I believe the open discussion aided the development of agricultural economics in Armidale, a development which has paid off handsomely - through New England graduates - in the BAE, in various departments, and in industry, as well of course as in its contribution to worldwide agricultural research activities and to the work of the World Bank.

My horizons for the BAE have not been, and are not, limited to Australia. I believe that, alongside the universities, it could play a direct role in Asia and the Pacific - if its political masters would agree. If not, we will have to continue to urge its members to go to universities and to the ADB, IBRD, and so on. I am sure that Helen Hughes, the new Director of the Development Studies Centre at the ANU, will push this line...

Finally, I continue to note with pleasure the way agricultural economics graduates in Australia prosper. I especially appreciate the way senior BAE people - Geoff Miller is a recent example - find their way up the Civil Service and into statutory bodies. It is a tribute to the reality that underlies their work.

Let me stop there - with the warning that my archival studies are only just under way! If any Ph.D. student at the UNE wants to write the story up (with appropriate hindsight criticism) he will get all the help I can give.



