Angus Maddison

In the spring of 1992, a conference was organised by the Economics Department of the University of Groningen to celebrate the 65th birthday of one of its Professors and his outstanding contributions to economics and economic history. It differed from the common Festschrift occasion by not being confined to a coterie of disciples in some recondite discipline paying tribute to their retiring mentor. It was attended by 34 economists from 10 different countries.

All of us were intellectual debtors to a large, hefty, ebullient Geordie, Angus Maddison, with a hugely enviable record in his knowledge of the extent, manner, causes and methods for encouraging economic growth. He had given up a career as a senior economist in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in order to have, as he put it, ‘more freedom to pursue my own research agenda’, adding that ‘The University of Groningen was the ideal spot for me’, admitting that he was also attracted by his love of picturesque old towns and ‘a night life which can compete with the Boulevard St Michel and the rue St Denis in Paris’.

Long before, he was a studious lad: the first of his family to attend a university, and, as a 13-year-old schoolboy at his local grammar school in Darlington, already interested in public affairs. This was perhaps not altogether surprising, coming originally from Tyneside where several members of his own family suffered from long-term unemployment. He arrived at Cambridge armed with an astonishing breadth of reading of famous economic texts, and particularly influenced by Keynes’s famous pamphlet How to Pay for the War and its reliance on Colin Clark’s pioneer efforts to produce national accounts.

He started as a history student at Cambridge in January 1945, but his long-standing interest in policy veered him towards economics. At that time LSE was still evacuated to Cambridge. He was able to attend the lectures given by an astonishing range of internationally known scholars, such as Hayek, Kaldor, Laski, Arthur Lewis and Tawney from LSE, as well as Cambridge notables such as Michael Postan, Dennis Robertson, Joan and Austin Robinson, and Maurice Dobb, who became his tutor. Nevertheless, Angus averred that ‘peer group was as important in the learning process as the lectures and supervision’, adding that those who contributed most to this aspect of his education were fellow undergraduates Wilfred Beckerman and Robin Marris, who were later to have equally colourful careers.

Much the most interesting professional legacy of his Cambridge years was a firm resolve to follow the career of economist and to specialise in economic measurement. He already had a subject in mind — reasons for differential productivity growth in countries with similar institutional structures. He would then be following the examples of Dobb, Postan and Austin Robinson, who were more attuned to deriving practical results from economic analysis. They were not engaged in the time-consuming and bitter parochial disputes on high economic theory that were to tear the Cambridge faculty apart.

On graduation in 1949 Angus was given financial support to study across the Pond, first in Canada at McGill in Montreal and then in the United States at Johns Hopkins, Baltimore. Another opportunity was provided to study with outstanding economists. The Johns Hopkins faculty included Domar, Harberger, Clarence Long, Machlup, and ‘visiting firemen’ such as Bergson, Kuznets and Viner. Having his written work subjected to close scrutiny was a revelation. He had already drafted a 20-page paper on Canadian industrial productivity, which he showed to his supervisor, Clarence Long. He was amazed to receive back a 15-page commentary of documented criticism of his sloppy reasoning, weak evidence, poor table layout, inadequate sources and woolly conclusions! He had the good sense to realise that this was ‘exactly what graduate students need and usually do not get’.

On his return to the United Kingdom he already felt he was equipped to write up his findings. He was offered a one-year appointment at the University of St Andrews, where he had time to do so, and by the end of his period of tenure had three articles in line for publication in peer-reviewed journals. It is a matter for regret to me, a St Andrews alumnus, that my Alma Mater were not able to celebrate this astonishing evidence of professional skill by turning his temporary post into an established one. Fortunately, Angus’s talents were soon more clearly recognised elsewhere.

Angus joined the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) — as it then was — in 1953, just at the time when it had ceased to be economic coordinator for the US Marshall Plan and had moved towards fostering economic cooperation among its European members, later extended to include their economic relations with Canada, Japan and the US itself. This called for an immense improvement in the availability of statistics of growth performance and in their diagnostic quality. He was soon accepted as a member of the exclusive club of pioneering ‘chiffrephiles’ — as he came to label them — which included some top brass of the National Bureau of Economic Research, New York, such as Ed Denison and John Kendrick, both of whom presented papers at Angus’s Festschrift.

This considerable input of resources into computing national income data could be justified only if it shed light on the conduct of economic policies other than economic stability.
This was symbolised in the link sought between economic cooperation and economic growth when the OEEC was transformed into the OECD.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, Angus became a key figure in answering this call. He identified more clearly the questions that the data had to answer: how to measure and compute growth performance? What causes inter-country variance in growth rates? Will inter-country growth rates converge? What can be done to help poor countries develop faster? This led him into an extension of both the geographical coverage and the timescale of growth.

Education and technology, by now commonly labelled as 'human capital', became of special interest in the promotion of economic growth. Educational philosophers were horrified by the idea. Considerable opposition was encountered in persuading state educational departments to revise their databases to take account of the requirements of economic analysis.

These activities would have been impossible to pursue had Angus not taken periodic leave free of administrative duties, spending it visiting a plethora of countries ranging from Brazil to Mongolia. He came away from them leaving a trail of admiring officials anxious to help such an impressive, friendly and unstuffy international civil servant. He was not one who only shunted between their offices and some international hotel, hunched over a laptop.

His professional achievement as an economic statistician is obvious. Of particular interest today is the implicit criticism that his statistical methods provide of the projections on economic growth in the IPCC’s attempts at estimating the influence of economic growth on climate change. He has forced a rethink of theories of growth, postulating take-off at different points in time for major western economies at which mercantilism was ‘suddenly’ succeeded by an industrial ‘revolution’. His data showed that growth accelerated after 1820 in the West and was synchronous rather than disparate as between countries.

On policy matters he was resolute in his view that rising income per capita was a necessary if not a sufficient condition for the improvement in human welfare, making him sceptical of proposals to deduct estimates of the social costs of growth from per capita figures. This is not surprising, for Maddison knew all about poverty and economic hardship which was there for all to see during his childhood years in the north-east. His own father and mother had been forced to leave school at 12, but were ardent believers in educational improvement. When clever young Angus passed the examination to enter Darlington Grammar School, his Dad annually sacrificed six weeks of take-home pay as a railway fitter to meet the fees. Angus never forgot this.

Alan Peacock

Notes:
3. This is a shortened version of the obituary that appeared in World Economy 11 (3) 2010. We are grateful to the editors and to Sir Alan for permission to publish this revised version.