Fred Meyer

Dr Frederick Victor Meyer, who died on September 23 aged 85, was a former Reader in Economics at Exeter University, and the mentor and friend of generations of students. Fred was born in Vienna three days after the Armistice, on 14 November 1918, the son of Stefan Julius Meyer and Emilie Meyer. Stefan Meyer was a scientist working on radioactivity who eventually became Director of the Vienna Radium Institute.

Fred went to school at The Abbey of our Lady of the Scots, a monastery in the centre of Vienna whose alumni included Johann Strauss. Two years after he left school, Hitler invaded Austria, and Fred left for England, the only member of his family to get out. After getting both a bachelor’s degree and a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics he worked in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, before going to Manchester University. In 1949 he moved to the then University College of the South West, which in 1955 became Exeter University. Fred stayed there until his retirement as Reader in International Economics in 1984. Indeed in one sense he never retired, continuing to take a close interest in the life of the economics department and becoming first president of the Exeter Economics Graduates Association (EEGA) on its founding in 1991.

The choice for this job was never in doubt. Fred left an indelible impression on his students, as an inspired and inspiring teacher, who could reverse their conception of economics, or anything in it, in the space of a single tutorial. You would meet a short stocky man with an accent he owed to his native dialect of Uber Osterreich and a whistling hearing aid. Fred never complained about his deafness, but in truth the compensations of being able to switch off departmental meetings, or economists with a rigorous analysis that was going nowhere, were minor indeed. It is for international economics that he will be best remembered, but in fact his teaching especially in the early years was varied and catholic. His research career, beginning in 1948 and continuing into his retirement, remains unique within his department for its longevity. Anyone who thought a university was primarily a research institute where students were peripheral could expect a sharp retort, yet the fact remains that he, more than anyone else, kept research going in a department which went through lean intellectual times more than once.

Fred’s main books were British Colonies in World Trade (1948), Great Britain, The Sterling Area and Europe (1952), United Kingdom Trade with Europe (1957), The Terms of Trade (1962), The Functions of Sterling (1973), International Trade Policy (1978) and the co-authored Problems of a Mature Economy (1970). His edited work Prospects for Recovery in the British Economy appeared in 1985, and his many journal articles included ‘The Effects of the Overseas Slump on the British Economy’ (with W. Arthur Lewis, 1949) and ‘Complementarity and the lowering of tariffs’, published in the American Economic Review in 1956. At the time of his death he was working on a book on the theory of international trade. In retirement he gave unstinting comments and advice on the research work of colleagues, including some who had not even joined the economics department until after he had left it.

Fred was the least intimidating of tutors, yet in a quiet way he expected a lot of his students. Some of the expectations were unconventional and not strictly academic. He expected them to be engaged to be married (though not, given the then sex ratio, to each other) by the time they finished his third-year course on international economics. This may have been on the basis of his own long and happy marriage to Jean Jenkin, whom he married in 1948. But his alcohol-related recommendations were also eccentric. His invention of a ‘Customs Union’ was supposed to demonstrate the best side of trade integration, given that it was a 50:50 mix of English gin and Scotch whisky. If you could drink several and still walk a straight line, the customs union between England and Scotland was deemed a failure. Students on the other hand who limited themselves to one Customs Union at his end-of-year parties, or, worse, refused to partake at all, would be met with a growl of ‘Haven’t I taught you anything?’ Anyone who gave up smoking, a sacrifice he never remotely considered himself, was greeted with ‘I see you’re being sensible’ and, as a former student remarked at his funeral, it was not said nicely.

The most demanding exam paper on the Exeter economics degree was the three-hour unseen essay (now alas discontinued) where students had a choice of topics from across economics. Fred held the record for the shortest question ever with ‘Why trade?’ until the devaluation of the pound in 1967 prompted him to surpass himself with ‘£1=$2.40?’ His students’ affection for him not only made him president of EEGA (EEGAA after the economics department merged with business studies in 1997) and guest of honour at all its meetings (which, until his last few months, he never missed), but also resulted in the raising of enough money from ex-students to fund two Fred Meyer scholarships. Initially these were reserved for students on the M.A. in the Economics of the European Union, which he himself had founded in the mid-1970s. More recently they have been available for research students pursuing European themes as well.

No one could know Fred without knowing what a kind and generous man he was. Colleagues and students alike will remember his hospitality, and his succession of characterful and not especially well-behaved small dogs. Fred and Jean were always the first to invite new lecturers to dinner, and when the Meyer sons went on to university they were surprised, after their experience of home, to find how seldom dons asked students round to their houses. Jean predeceased Fred in 1996. He is survived by his two sons Steven and John.

John Maloney,
University of Exeter