Ronald Tress

Ronald Tress, who has died aged 91, was an eminent applied economist and a formidable administrator who became Master of Birkbeck College, London, Secretary-General of the Royal Economic Society and Director of the Leverhulme Trust. He made a lasting impact on many aspects of higher education, on the development of certain British colonies post independence and on the economic growth of the South West of England.

Ronald Tress was born in Upchurch, Kent in 1915 and won a place at Gillingham County School. From there he won a scholarship to University College, Southampton (now Southampton University) where he took a first class honours degree in Economics.

He then spent a year as a Gladstone student studying at St Deiniol’s Library, Hawarden, but he decided against entering the church and instead gained a Drummond Fraser Research fellowship to Manchester University. From there he took his first teaching position at the University College of the South West, Exeter (later to become the University of Exeter).

From 1941 until the end of the war, he worked in Whitehall as an Economic Assistant in the War Cabinet Offices, and was thus a junior member of the brilliant team of economists led by Lionel Robbins, James Meade, Richard Stone and others. Immediately after the war he was sent to Paris to assist with the Marshall Plan. In 1945 he became Economic Adviser to the Cabinet Secretariat.

He returned to higher education in 1947, becoming Reader in Public Finance at the London School of Economics, where he pioneered the teaching of National Income and Social Accounting. He became managing Editor of the London and Cambridge Economic Service, then a major source of national economic statistics.

In 1951 he was appointed to the newly-created chair of Political Economy at the University of Bristol. Here, he proved a very effective and respected teacher, often lecturing without notes and always treating his students with kindness and humanity. At Bristol, he and Harold Dickinson lobbied hard and eventually successfully for the creation of a Faculty of Social Sciences against considerable resistance. He became the first Dean of the Faculty on Dickinson’s retirement and was responsible for the creation of a chair in Accounting. Together with Arthur Brown, he created and maintained the Tress-Brown index to measure university costs. Today's Higher Education Pay and Prices Index is its direct descendant.

Between 1955 and 1963, a number of Foreign and Colonial Office appointments involved him visiting various colonies in order to assess them economically, prior to their independence. Beginning with the Nigeria Fiscal Commission in 1955, he later went to Aden, followed by East Africa, notably Uganda and finally Kenya in 1963.

In 1965, he became Chairman of the South West Economic Planning Council, which, in 1967, published a draft strategy for the South West of England. Some of the consequences of this report were the extension of the M5 to Plymouth, an improved spine road to Penzance, the enlargement of Exeter Airport and the development of the Royal Dock at Portbury.

In 1968, Tress was appointed Master of Birkbeck College where he remained for the next ten years. He returned to find a college facing considerable internal disagreements but he supported the unique mission of Birkbeck of providing higher education for mature part-time students and ensured the financial security of the College at a difficult time for universities. He proved to be a firm, supportive Master, and it was perhaps inevitable that he would establish an Economics department at Birkbeck, which still flourishes.

Retiring from Birkbeck in 1978, he was appointed Director of the Leverhulme Trust. During his tenure he saw the Trust’s income more than double and was able to assist in the funding of a number of successful research projects. In this influential position, where he was continually courted for research grants, Ronnie was a pleasure to deal with. While he was sympathetic to requests from economists, he gave them no special priority, although it was a pleasure for the profession to have someone in that position who understood what economic research was all about.

Tress was involved with many bodies outside his professional career. From 1975 to 1979 he was Secretary-General of the Royal Economic Society and a Vice-President thereafter. At various times, he served as a Trustee of the City Parochial Foundation, Chairman of the Lord Chancellor’s Advisory Committee on Legal Aid, a Governor of Christ Church College, Canterbury, a Member of Council of Kent University, a Member of the National Incomes Commission and the Development Commission, to name but a few.

He was a shrewd and resolute leader and a sensitive judge of people, treating their opinions with respect. He was admired for his knowledge, his wisdom and his common sense, as well as for the cool and controlled manner in which he always conducted himself. All these activities, however, had an impact on Tress’s academic output, which, although of high quality, was confined to a limited number of articles and reviews.

Ronnie Tress’s qualities were recognised by the conferment on him of the CBE and of a number of honorary degrees. He received honorary degrees from Furman University,
South Carolina, the University of Exeter, the Open University and the Universities of Southampton and Kent. These were a tribute to the respect and affection with which he was regarded by all who had the pleasure of working with him.

_Aubrey Silberston and Tom Tress_
_(with contributions from John Whitaker, University of Virginia)_