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William Coleman

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Geoffrey Brennan and the History of Economics

In the recent passing of Geoffrey Brennan, the History of Economic Thought has lost a distinguished friend and patron.

Brennan – eminent public choice economist, theorist of democracy, and ‘positive analyst of the normative’ – would never have described himself as a historian of economics. But Australian historians of economic thought knew well his engagement with political economy’s past. In 2013, to the annual gathering of Australia’s HET network, he ‘expressed his misgivings concerning ... the decline of history of economic thought in teaching and research’ (Brennan et al. 2014). Not long before, he had been a key participant in a series of seminars on drafts of *The Science of Wealth: Adam Smith and the Framing of Political Economy* (Aspromourgos 2009). A little later, he was a leading figure in a series of conferences organized by a past editor of *History of Economics Review*, which had by design an HET undertow.¹ His (co-authored) *Economy of Esteem* (Brennan and Pettit 2004) appeared at about this time, and is virtually pegged on a premise of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1759 [1976]). One of his last papers distinctly and credibly draws on Adam Smith to articulate issues in the analysis of self-esteem (Brennan 2020).

The support and patronage of HET by Australia’s leading ‘social theorist’ is no minuscule consolation to the discipline’s practitioners in the country. For by this support Brennan set himself apart from the attitude of the mass of economists. Which prompts the question, what set him apart? Did he, in a state of alienation from economic orthodoxy, go in search of some ‘hidden stream’ of economics? I don’t believe so. I suspect he was less in some needful quest of ‘precursors’ than responsive to what he found in HET. And what was that? Geoff was a man who lived amid big ideas, and it was in the great eighteenth-century texts that he found many. Thus he joined in the cry, ‘Save the Books’.

But in the light of this susceptibility to what the past offered, one may ask why Brennan didn’t do more HET, or do it better? His (co-authored) ‘The Impartial Spectator Goes to Washington: Toward a Smithian Theory of Electoral Behavior’ (Brennan and Lomasky 1985) was an early articulation of the expressive theory of voting. But, in the present writer’s view, it is an unsuccessful invocation of Smith’s (1759 [1976]) *Moral Sentiments*; more obscuring than illuminating of the valuable ideas Brennan was exploring. The ‘expressive voter’ is not impartial; and the ‘impartial spectator’ is only incidentally expressive.

Part of the explanation why Brennan was more patron than producer of HET was that he was first and last a theorist. He once ventured that David Hume ‘was the originator of the concept of economic rationality’ (Brennan 2013), a hypothesis which is attractive in its simplicity, boldness and plausibility: a hypothesis, in other words, attractive to a theorist, but less so to the historian on account of those very things. He once recalled being told: ‘Brennan, you don’t have a historical bone in your body’.² Certainly, the one species of HET that appealed to him was rational reconstruction, the least historical method, one has to say, of HET.

Additionally, HET, I would venture, was too spectatorial for him. To Geoff, it has been recalled, music was something to be performed, not listened to. Similarly, economics was to be done, not merely appreciated, or interpreted or deconstructed. This matter of psychology might be pursued a bit further. If I may state the obvious, Geoffrey Brennan in psychological type was a dominant extrovert, with all that implies, including a propensity to a social style of research; thus his many accomplished feats of co-authorship. One participant in one of these feats records, 'the norms book was written by having regular lunches (always with a glass or two of good red) and then taking turns writing up the invariably fascinating and wide-ranging conversations that ensued' (Southwood 2022). This is, evidently, a way of writing a worthy book on norms (Brennan et al. 2013), especially with the aid of the theoretical powers of a Brennan. But it is not an obvious way to conduct HET.

Brennan's appetite for life left him irrepressible and undaunted in every context. Sydney born, he grew up in 1950s Broken Hill, not a propitious environment for forming a philosopher. In Kenneth Cook's take on the Silver City that decade, Broken Hill was 'a variation of hell' (Cook 1967). In Blainey's (1968) account, 1950s Broken Hill is a town of dense unionization, restrictive practices, and the reservation of jobs to the locally born: 'Workers of the World, Keep Out', was effectively its motto (Blainey 1968, 150). Geoff once recalled of his high school classmates that anyone who aspired to achieve more than the approved level of mediocrity was scornfully branded 'a hero'. Geoff was, of course, one of the tallest of tall poppies. But notwithstanding any resentful attempt to cut him down, he was Captain and Dux of Broken Hill High School (Barrier Blast 2016).

His school results took him to the Australian National University in Canberra, where at the age of 18 he won four vocal contests in the National Eisteddfod, displaying, one critic noted, 'a fine sense of theatre' (Canberra Times 1963). A full-time career in music beckoned, but was declined in favour of the academy. There was a lectureship in public finance at the ANU, a PhD enrolment at Dalhousie, and publications began to flow.

His appointment to the Public Choice Centre at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1976–83 appears to have been sharply reorientating, above all through his pivotal encounter with James Buchanan. 'Not everyone could handle Buchanan's formidable intellect and particular personality' (Lynch 2022). But the sunny and irenic Brennan proved a foil to the caustic and vehement Buchanan, and a fertile collaboration during the late 1970s yielded two books central to the new field of public choice (Brennan and Buchanan 1980, 1985).

One incident in their relationship may illuminate both. Brennan – a man of 'deep Christian faith' – had attended an Ash Wednesday service, and on returning to campus, had unwittingly left an ash mark remain on his forehead (Brennan & Munger 2014). On observing this mark, Buchanan fell into a fury at what he evidently saw as Brennan's violation of the separation of church and state. I am not sure if Buchanan's militant atheism tells on his philosophy, but I believe there is something 'Anglican' about Brennan's style of thought. A centre-ness in outlook, an aspiration to catholicity and an aversion to sects, a strain of social gospel, and a presumption of doctrinal continuity: they are all there in his secular theorizing.³

In the mid-1980s Brennan returned to Australia, without being very satisfied with the state of Australian academia. But he found a congenial environment in the Research School of Social Sciences of the ANU, and its philosophy department. In the 30 years of his career which followed he had much less to do with the economics profession than an economist might expect. In one recollection, 'He had an imperious manner in relation to many of his orthodox colleagues'.⁴ My understanding is it was a member of HETSA, with the assistance of another, who pressed in 2013 his long overdue award of Distinguished Fellowship of the Economic Society of Australia.

The passage of the years, it seems, revealed that the centre of Brennan's interests was not positive economics. From the beginning of his intellectual career, he seemed most engaged in a search for some normative set of principles, constraints or regimen. While never exhortatory in style, he had not much interest in solely 'positive' diagnosis. He was more pastor than doctor, while economists are much the reverse. Or should I say, more the philosopher? It is recorded that Geoff approached his final illness with a 'wonderful equanimity' (Cullity 2022). 'I find I have no fear of death' he told one friend at this time (Spiekermann 2022). This is so reminiscent of the last days of another philosopher – also of a 'famously[,] but also genuinely[,] equable, sociable, and cheerful character' (Robertson 2004) – that perhaps it gives a glimpse of what we have lost in losing Geoff Brennan; a twentieth-century imago, not of Adam Smith, but of David Hume.

Notes

1. Freedom to Choose 2013: 'The Economics of Government Failure'; Freedom to Choose 2015: 'God and the Market'; Freedom to Choose 2016: 'Australian Economic Problems through a Public Choice Lens'. An addendum to that series was 'The Life and Contributions of James Buchanan' in 2019.
2. Private conversation with the author.
3. I might further speculate that this style of thought is not very prominent in Australian intellectual life – and Brennan himself might exemplify something of 'a hidden stream'.
4. Private reflection conveyed to the author.

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Notes on contributor

William Coleman is an economist with degrees from the University of Sydney and the London School of Economics. His most recent book is "Their Fiery Cross of Union: A Retelling of the Creation of the Australian Federation, 1889–1914".

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William Coleman
University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle, Australia
 williamolivercoleman@outlook.com