

OBITUARY

Don Lamberton 1927 – 2014

Don Lamberton died on 28 November 2014, age 87. Don, along with Tom Mandeville and the current general editor, founded *Prometheus*. That was in 1983. For most of the 32 years since then, Don was general editor of *Prometheus*. Were it not for Don's determination and his certainty that *Prometheus* had something important to offer, the journal would have folded long ago.

Don was an economist and an intellectual, not descriptors that always go together. Indeed, his intellectual skills made apparent – at least to him – the limitations of orthodox economics and soon enough the strengths of an alternative. This was information economics, a perspective on economics which was to define both Don's contribution to academic thought, and Don's very nature. Don was single-minded, even obsessive, a crusader dedicated to the conversion of heathen economists. This did not always endear him to heathen economists. Don was annoyed and perplexed by their inability to see the world in a new way – his way. With its Diamond List of top journals, economics was probably the first academic discipline to judge its members in terms of their publication in these journals. Hardly surprising then that Don, though lavish in his appreciation of scholarly publication, came to despise the current use of publication in the right journals to measure academic merit. By modern standards, Don hardly patronized such journals and was most proud of his edited collections of essential readings, particularly the special issue on the information revolution that came out in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* in 1974, and what he always called 'the Penguin book', *The Economics of Information and Knowledge*, published in 1971. For Don, information was to be used, not counted.

Without a smidgen of doubt, Don was the best read of academics. He could always support his arguments with chapter and verse – and, infuriatingly, always did. Many a listener might be forgiven for thinking Don less interested in persuasion than in bombardment by reference. In his enthusiasm, he tended to forget that other people were less informed about information economics than he was, and sometimes even less interested. The result was that folk were always impressed by his erudition without necessarily being persuaded that his cause was right. In consequence, Don was generally doomed to be a frustrated crusader: he might conquer, but he did not always convert. His students were the exception. They really did believe, and still do.

While he had little time for many of his fellow men, especially orthodox economists, Don would do almost anything for his students. Concern for the intellectual development of students has long been uncommon among academics and with rewards to research now so much greater than those to teaching, has become rarer still. The teaching of huge classes is now foisted on academics who need to be punished or on powerless beginners. Don was clear that the most senior academics

should teach first-year students. How else would the students be inspired? But supervising Ph.D. students was what he loved most of all. While other academics, ever mindful of the performance metrics, rushed to research, Don took on prodigious numbers of postgraduates, often in universities beyond his own. He became their mentor for life, guiding their careers through universities in Europe and the United States. Always Don's influence on their thinking was profound. And unlike almost all other supervisors, who tend to regard their postgraduates as free *amanuenses*, Don never published with his students. He saw his job as inspiring students, not exploiting them.

It is said that prophets are not recognized in their own land: Don was no exception. Even when the importance of information economics was acknowledged by the award of Nobel prizes to Joseph Stiglitz, Michael Spence and George Akerlof in 2001, Australian economists stuck grimly to their neoliberal lasts. According to John Lodewijks, who interviewed Don in 2007, the award prompted Don to search the *Economic Record* (for Don, the encapsulation of everything rotten in Australian economics) for reference to any of the 111 single-authored Stiglitz papers published in the decade before 2001. He found only five citations, one inaccurate and the remaining four irrelevant to information economics (Lodewijks, 2007). One might observe that Australian isolation from cutting edge research in economics might have been lessened had Don not spent years packing off his very best students to foreign universities. But even without Don's intervention, good academics of all stripes tended to leave Australia to better their prospects. Don himself had gone to Oxford for his D.Phil. and regarded the time he spent at the world's top universities as his most productive. He should probably have stayed overseas for the sake of his career, but Don was Australian through and through. He loved Stanford, but he loved trekking through the Binna Burra bush even more. It is impossible to understand Don without appreciating just how Australian this erudite, cosmopolitan man was.

Don hailed from rural New South Wales, born into a farming family very far from wealthy. He was home taught until 11, and left school at 14, finding a job in a Bangalow bank. The next few years shaped the budding Don and their influence can be seen in much of his outlook on life. For instance, his gratitude to individuals in the bank for their encouragement was clearly reflected in the help he himself gave to the students he supervised. Don was immensely proud of his proletarian beginnings and of a meritocratic system – a system he saw as distinctly Australian – that had enabled him to find his place in the world. It was a Commonwealth scholarship that allowed him to attend the University of Sydney. Afterwards, his short stint on the 5pm to 2am shift with the *Sydney Morning Herald* and his five years with the Sydney stock exchange working on share price index numbers persuaded him of the advantages of other employment. He found himself in an economics department at the University of New England and might have languished there but for the opportunity to go to Oxford. He never tired of telling people that his Nuffield days had been funded by the Australian War Services Canteen Trust Fund. Accomplishment itself was not important (he never told anyone that he had gained a first class degree at the University of Sydney, and kept pretty quiet about the Order of Australia awarded towards the end of his life); that accomplishment was possible even for a New South Wales country lad was very important indeed.

The world's top universities offered Don intellectual succour, and access to individuals he considered to be in some way special. These were less likely to be the

great authors of the age – Don was not a snob – than individuals Don regarded as scholars. Quite what constituted a scholar in Don's mind was never clear. Perhaps those who understood Don's explication of his thinking sufficiently to add thoughts of value to Don. Few women occupied their ranks. On occasion, he would import these scholars to Australia so that some of their wisdom might rub off on others. It rarely did; others could be spectacularly unimpressed by what impressed Don. A lesser man would have given up on his countrymen and, like so many talented Australians, worked permanently overseas. For Don the Australian, this was never an option. The alternative was travel and Don notched up the air miles flitting from one overseas meeting to another for enough intellectual fix to see him through a few more months in Australia. He would travel with no more than cabin baggage and always managed to infiltrate himself into an airport's business lounge. The less Don was appreciated in Australia, the more he saw travelling as vindication in itself. On only one occasion, when the Reverend Moon invited him to address the Moonies in Korea, did Don prevaricate about an overseas trip. He went.

The University of Queensland was home to Don Lamberton – and to *Prometheus* – for nigh on two decades. There he was, once again, a member of a conventional economics department, this one being mercilessly suffocated by a behemoth of a management school. If Don hated anything more than orthodox economics, it was management. At Queensland, he found himself in the peculiar position of defending orthodox economics against the encroachment of management – the merely misguided against the beastly barbarian. When *Prometheus* expanded its scope from an information perspective on innovation to include management approaches to change, Don would have none of it. Don held the subject and its practitioners in disdain and had no interest in following the academic career path into university management. He served his term as head of department, but under duress and in utter misery. As co-director of the Centre for International Research in Communication and Information Technologies, established by the Victorian government in 1989, he was uncomfortable and just as unhappy. The venture was ill-advised, mismanaged and deserving of its failure, as Don was the first to acknowledge. Even the many government enquiries on which Don served called for too much conventional thinking and compromise for Don to stomach. Don wrote his own, often quite brilliant, minority reports – from an information perspective, of course. Don lived – and he died – an information economist.

In memory of Don, *Prometheus* will publish a special issue of papers written by Don's students. The tribute seems appropriate.

Reference

- Lodewijks, J. (2007). 'Professor of foresight: an interview with Donald Lamberton', *Journal of Economic and Social Policy*, 11, 2, article 5, available at <http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp/vol11/iss2/5/>.

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