In Memoriam: Robert B. Ekelund Jr.

Robert F. Hébert

The noted economist Robert Burton Ekelund Jr. passed away on August 17, 2023, a few weeks shy of his eighty-third birthday. He was my lifelong friend, colleague, coauthor, and confidant. His death is mourned by the many who knew him. Bob was born in Galveston, Texas, obtained a master's degree from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, and was awarded a PhD in economics by Louisiana State University. He began his academic career at Texas A&M University and ended it at Auburn University, where he also served briefly as acting codirector of the Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Arts. He retired from Auburn University in 2003 as the Catherine and Edward Lowder Eminent Scholar Emeritus and remained in Auburn for the remainder of his life. He was a policy adviser at the Heartland Institute, a research fellow at the Independent Institute, and an adjunct faculty member at the Mises Institute. Shortly before his death he was named a Distinguished Fellow of the History of Economics Society, its equivalent of a lifetime achievement award. In an age of specialists, Bob Ekelund was a modern polymath who combined prodigious talents with a warm and engaging personality. His memory lives on in the hearts and minds of his many friends, associates, colleagues, and former students.

Bob's father was the son of Swedish immigrants, and his mother was a Louisiana Cajun. This unlikely provenance made for a unique product in many respects. He was an only child (a male sibling died at birth), whose parents willfully indulged his youthful habits. He became an avid reader at age six, began piano lessons soon after, and at some point, took up the artist's brush. Economics was his compass, but

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The Independent Review, v. 29, n. 2, Fall 2024, ISSN 1086–1653, Copyright © 2024, pp. 327–332.

literature, music, and art were his passions. He claimed only "amateur" standing in the latter, but that did not stop him from entering and placing in competitive piano contests, nor from selling his paintings at local and regional galleries. He practiced piano daily in an ongoing quest to improve. He painted almost as often, until Parkinson's disease robbed him of the ability to continue either activity. What time he had left over he devoted mainly to his spouse, friends, garden, and cats.

Bob was certainly no amateur in economics. The amount of his published output is astonishing. Careful perusal of his curriculum vitae raises the question of whether he ever took time to eat and sleep. He preferred to work with coauthors, reaping the benefits of team production, which he pushed to extraordinary limits. Probably a major reason for that is his mind teemed with more research-worthy ideas than any single individual could fully exploit. He chose collaborators carefully, in most cases recognizing an aptitude or skill he found lacking in himself. And he drove himself incessantly, often shaming his coauthors into keeping up. He referred to himself as "a workaholic," and insisted that work justified his existence. Counting multiple editions, Bob published thirty books and more than two hundred journal articles, book reviews, encyclopedia entries, and position papers. Thirty of his journal articles were reprinted by various compilers, giving them second life. His research and writings ranged over such disparate fields as the history of economic thought and economic history, the economics of regulation and industrial organization, microeconomic theory and its applications, advertising, trade theory, political economy, Public Choice and religion, cultural economics, and more.

Throughout his academic career Bob was ever alert to opportunities to identify, document, analyze, and measure the nature and effects of ideas and institutions on human behavior. He could easily have become an archaeologist or anthropologist. He occasionally joked that he was attracted to psychology because he thought it would help him understand his own foibles and idiosyncrasies. Ultimately, he chose economics, encouraged and guided by his mentors, Professors Ludwig Mai of St. Mary's University and James P. Payne Jr. of Louisiana State University. Upon embarking on studies in economics, he discovered an affinity for the analytics of price theory. However, he was less interested in pure theory than its applications, of which he saw plenty. Separately and jointly he and Bob Tollison not only enriched economic literature but also encouraged and sustained third-generation Public Choice analysts, such as Mark Crain, Bill Shughart, Dave Laband, Bobby McCormick, Bruce Benson, and Don Boudreaux. He directed more than fifty theses and dissertations while at Texas A&M and Auburn, and he left an indelible imprint on every one of his students. He gave of his time unselfishly, imparting life lessons as well as professional habits and expectations. He set standards high and expected his students and protégés to follow his lead.

As a writer, Bob worked in two separate but complementary markets. He wrote for students on the one hand, and for his fellow economists on the other.

He coauthored popular textbooks in the history of economic thought (with Robert F. Hébert), general economics (with Robert D. Tollison), macroeconomics (with Charles D. Delorme), intermediate microeconomics (with Richard Ault), intermediate macroeconomics (with Charles D. Delorme and Dennis Jansen), and money and banking (with Leonardo Auernheimer). At the higher level his books and articles dealt with advertising, politics, the U.S. Civil War, the international transmission of ideas, the behavior of organizations and institutions, government administration, religion, art, and the medieval church.

Bob would probably recoil at the idea of a "greatest hits" appraisal of his work, but certain of his contributions stand out for their originality and acuity. With coauthors Bob Hébert and Bob Tollison, he spearheaded the application of Public Choice principles to understanding the organizational behavior of pre-Reformation Western institutions. The "three Bobs" peeled back the layers of the medieval church as an economic organization, exploring an area that used to be called "nonmarket behavior," before Nobel laureate Gary Becker virtually destroyed that category by opening new vistas in applied economics. Inspired by Becker, the three Bobs melded the insights of Harold Demsetz, Sam Peltzman, and George Stigler on regulatory economics; Douglass North and Oliver Williamson on the economics of organizational behavior and institutional change; and James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock on the political economy of Public Choice. Together they forged an early formulation of the economics of religion, displayed in several articles and two books: *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm* (1996), and its companion, *The Marketplace of Christianity* (2006). The guiding principle throughout these studies is that Public Choice provides a modus operandi for understanding historical institutions, events, and policies.

Besides pioneer contributions to the economics of religion, Bob Ekelund's name will be forever linked with that of Jules Dupuit (1804–1866), the French engineer-economist who, though largely neglected in Anglo-Saxon literature, forged microanalytic tools designed to explain the intricacies of the optimal pricing of public sector goods, particularly transportation. The famed Italian economist Luigi Einaudi called Dupuit "one of the greatest precursors of modern economic science." Dupuit was the product of a peculiar French system of higher education designed to train technocrats in pre–belle epoque France. Alfred Marshall, a leading British economist, extolled these French engineers as the most able on the Continent. Self-taught in economics, Dupuit made remarkable analytical progress in a field that intimately affected the practice of engineering but had not yet become the exclusive province of economists. The story of Dupuit's outstanding achievements is outlined in detail by Ekelund and Hébert, *Secret Origins of Modern Microeconomics: Dupuit and the Engineers* (1999). This book exposes the fact that Dupuit discovered and developed traditional contemporary microeconomics in full measure before the mid-nineteenth century. His inventions include standard market theory as well as monopoly theory, including a

sophisticated discussion of the degrees of discrimination, welfare theory, marginal cost pricing, spatial analysis, time and transport costs, and empirical economics. Thus revealed, it can now be affirmed that modern, partial equilibrium, so-called Marshallian economics, is French, not British, and its tool kit was exposed in plain sight *before* the middle of the nineteenth century.

Focus on his major achievements, however, should not obscure the rest of Bob's many contributions. His "team approach" collaborations regularly cranked out articles on a variety of topics, usually with provocative titles, e.g., "The Pope and the Price of Meat" (with Richard Ault and Robert Tollison, 1987); "The Problem of Unnecessary Originality in Economics" (with Richard Ault, 1987); "Habits in Economic Analysis: Veblen and the Neoclassicals" (with Richard Ault, 1988); "Cournot and His Contemporaries: Is an Obituary the Only Bad Review?" (with Robert Hébert, 1990); "Quality Choice and Price Discrimination" (with T. Randolph Beard, 1991); "The Economics of Sin and Redemption: Purgatory as a Market-Pull Innovation?" (with Robert Hébert and Robert Tollison, 1992); "The Union Blockade and Demoralization of the South: Relative Prices in the Confederacy" (with Mark Thornton, 1992); "The 'Death-Effect' in Art Prices: A Demand-Side Explanation" (with Rand Ressler and J. Keith Watson, 2000); "Smokeless Tobacco, Smoking Cessation and Harm Reduction: An Economic Analysis" (with Richard Ault, John Jackson, and Richard Saba, 2004); "Marriage, Divorce and Prostitution: Economic Sociology in Medieval England and Enlightenment Spain" (with Donald R. Street and Audrey B. Davidson, 2006); and "Secularism, Religion, and Political Choice in the United States" (with T. Randolph Beard, George Ford, Ben Gaskins, and Robert Tollison, 2013).

On a personal level Bob treasured friendship and held his friends close. He liked familiarity in his professional and personal life. Despite his erudition and savoir-faire, he shunned "new" situations that required change and adaptability. For this reason, he left Texas A&M reluctantly, even after it became increasingly evident that the department there was drifting away from the kind of economic inquiry with which he identified. He maintained continuous affiliations with only two universities over his academic career: Texas A&M, 1967–1979, and Auburn, 1979–2003. He could be perceived as a bundle of contradictions, but his closest friends chose either to ignore his incongruities or to tolerate them. Some even found them endearing. He was both a homebody and a bon vivant. Within his tight circle of friends, he was generous and gregarious, but he shunned larger crowds. He loved to travel but feared flying. He was a brilliant writer but avoided oration. A talented chef, he was capable of haute cuisine, but his favorite dishes were fried chicken and homemade chili. He installed a swimming pool in his garden, but hardly ever dipped his toe in the water. He could be impetuous, passionate, and sometimes hurtful, but his pique was always short-lived. His personal idiosyncrasies and peccadilloes were accepted as simply part of who he was.

Bob was a patron of the arts and a voracious reader. He was a professional who extolled amateurism, especially in music and art. (See his autobiography self-published in 2018.) He liked stage productions and feature films. An avid fan of the TV game show *Jeopardy!*, he delighted in intellectual challenges. Hollywood's annual Academy Awards show was a highly anticipated event not to be missed. He revered Shakespeare and the great American authors Twain, Mencken, Poe, Dickinson, and especially Hemingway and Fitzgerald. He kept a volume of E. E. Cummings's poetry always close at hand. He internalized certain phrases that he encountered, such as "living well is the best revenge" (the title of a memoir by New York writer Calvin Tomkins about an American couple who helped define the expat experience in 1920s Paris that inspired F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *Tender Is the Night*).

Bob's lifespan exceeded his father's but fell short of his mother's. In retrospect it seems that he left this world too quickly and too quietly, but even with diminished eyesight he saw the end coming. Parkinson's disease had taken its toll on the last decade of his life. He often intoned the phrase *memento mori* (Remember you must die), matter-of-factly, without fear or loathing. He simply continued to throw himself headlong into what remained to be done. He worked until he could no longer, manifestly believing that death was not merely an end but also a beginning. He published his last book (written with former U.S. senator Phil Gramm and John Early), *The Myth of American Inequality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), the year before his death. The *Wall Street Journal* named it the best political book of 2022—a fitting final tribute.

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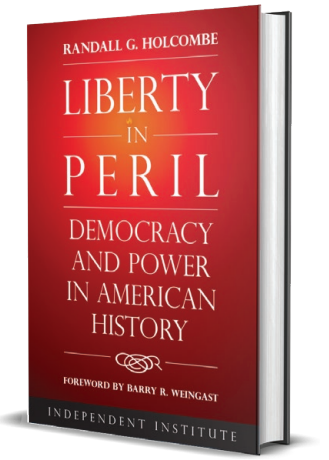
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