

The Importance of Exuberance – Alfred Marshall and Garret Fitzgerald

Frank J Convery

Frequent encounters with a four year old remind me of what leaks away as we grow older; joyful spontaneity makes way for caution, inertia, knowingness and calculation. Over the course of a long life, Garret Fitzgerald (1926-2011) was one of the very few who successfully resisted this entropy of the spirit. He was a largely self-taught economist – his first degree was in History, French and Spanish. He wrote on the subject in the *Irish Times* with such clarity and enthusiasm that he convinced me, and no doubt many others, that an economy was knowable in the sense that what was happening could be explained, policy choices and trade-offs could be interrogated, and evidence could inform decisions. In his ways of thinking and doing, he was very like the great English economist Alfred Marshall (1842-1924). They were both feminists who were relentless in their pursuit of evidence, shared a passion for education, and identified productivity as the key enabler of economic performance.

Sylvia Nasar observes that Marshall was ‘hungry for facts’; his ‘Red Book’ contained data on a variety of topics, ranging from music to technology to wage rates, arranged in chronological order.¹ He devoted several weeks every summer to fieldwork with his wife Mary Paley. Academics today will note with envy that he spent a decade laying the foundations of his subject, but published nothing during this gestation period.

She contrasts Marshall’s way of working with that of Dickens. The latter saw what he wanted to see; in *Hard Times*, he describes Coketown as inhabited by an army of people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work – ‘everyday was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.’ Where Dickens saw uniformity, Marshall observed variety; in his descriptions of factories and factory life, he records manufacturing techniques and pay scales and layouts, he questions everyone, from the owner to the foremen, to the men on the shop floor.

Fitzgerald too was obsessed about evidence and what it could yield. His final work was on Irish primary education in Ireland in the early 19th century, which was in draft when he died in May 2011.² This work was completed by his son John FitzGerald, and Gillian O’Brien, with the assistance of the editor James Kelly. It was published by the Royal Irish Academy in November 2013. The most satisfying part of any research is the surprise, and this book does not disappoint. Some examples: the “proportion of children registered at school in Ireland in 1824 may have been similar to that in England, lower than in Scotland, but higher than Wales”; James Doyle, Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin strongly endorsed the idea of religiously integrated education – “I do not see how.....peace can ever permanently established, or the prosperity of the country ever well secured,

¹ All of the material relating to Marshall’s life and work is taken from: *Grand Pursuit – the story of economic genius*, Fourth Estate, London, 2011, pp. 48-90

² Fitzgerald, Garret, 2013. *Irish Primary Education in the Early Nineteenth Century – an analysis of the first and second reports of the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry, 1825-6*, Royal Irish Academy, 2013. Dublin. It is in three chapters: Chapter 1: ‘The 1825-26 Commissioners of Irish Education reports: background and context’ by Gillian O’Brien (pp. 1-44); Chapter 2: ‘Irish primary education in 1824’, by Garret Fitzgerald (pp. 45-112); Chapter 3: ‘School attendance and literacy in Ireland before the Great Famine: a simple baronial analysis’, by Cormac ó Gráda (pp. 113-132); followed by appendices with data by province and barony.

if children are separated at the commencement of life, on account of their religious opinion"; in Ulster, 30% of the pupils in Catholic schools were Protestant.

Fitzgerald cherished education as the passport to an enriched and enriching life, and this priority was evident when he was Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland in recessionary times in the 1980s; when public expenditure was cut, education was spared. Marshall's priority was similar: "educate (in the broadest sense) the unskilled and inefficient workers out of existence.....If the number of unskilled workers was to diminish sufficiently, those who did unskilled work would have to be paid good wages." He noted that skilled workers were earning "two, three and four times as much as unskilled labourers". The fact that employers were willing to pay more for specialised training or skill implied that wages depended on workers' contribution to current output.

Marshall was well ahead of his time in understanding one of the well springs of innovation. "Most improvements in detail are made by the foremen of the several shops: & improvements on a very large scale are made by a man who does nothing else...." This sentence should be above the door in every workplace in Ireland – small improvements will be made by the local boss. Step change needs a specialist.

Their career trajectories diverged, in that Marshall stuck to the academic last, while Fitzgerald went on to lead two Irish governments. In his political life, Fitzgerald understood one big thing: If you are to exert influence, you have to be at the table, and you have to have a strategy. Examples include the Anglo Irish Agreement (1985) which he negotiated with the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1985, and which for the first time provided the Irish government with an advisory role in relation to the governing of Northern Ireland. In his European strategy, he used his access to decision-making in the European Union to support supranational executive mechanisms of the EEC, in particular the Commission, over the intergovernmental.....preventing the emergence of a Directoire of the largest countries dominating agenda setting and decisions for the Union was a firm objective.³

Conclusion

Disaster will not be long deferred when evidence is disparaged, analysis of choices is occasional rather than routine, and intuition and emotion trump evidence. In their life and work, Garret Fitzgerald and Alfred Marshall showed us the value of evidence, and how it can be used to understand and improve our lives.

³ Address by Governor Patrick Honohan to UCD Garret FitzGerald Spring School, 8 February 2013
Available: <http://www.centralbank.ie/press-area/speeches%5CPages%5CHonohantoUCDGarretFitzGeraldSpringSchool.aspx>

