

Ronald Winthrop Jones (1931–2022): A Personal Memoriam

Ron Jones passed away peacefully on 27th September at 7:44 am. after a long illness. Born on July 5, 1931, he graduated from Swarthmore College in 1952 and obtained his Ph.D. from MIT in 1956. He taught right up to the point when at the age of 85, his illness prevented him from delivering his last lecture. His passing is a deep and profound loss to his students, to his colleagues, to his friends and admirers all over the world, and to be sure, to the economics profession.

For me, neither student nor colleague, I have lost more than a close personal friend, I have lost a ‘security blanket.’¹ For me, a giant oak in the field of high and elegant scholarship has been felled, its protective shade no longer a shield against the exposing glare of deteriorating standards. It is too early to attempt an impersonal obituary of the *oeuvre* that is his bequest to the subject of international trade and development, and to economic theory more generally. I shall instead confine myself to a few personal anecdotes, and some selected references to jog my memory as to who he was, and into what all he contributed, passing and cursory glimpses of a life of the mind well-lived.

But first a 1993 testimony from one of his Ph.D. students.

I spent the next years observing first hand (i.e. at Jones’s famously cluttered desk) how one of the world’s leading economic theorists and most elegant expositors identifies and solves problems, writes and rewrites drafts of papers, prepares lectures and conference presentations, and comments on others’ work whether as a referee or as a discussant. His generosity in sharing these many facets of his professional activities was unlimited; the value to me immeasurable.²

And from another.

For four decades Jones has pondered almost every significant issue addressed by trade theory. Very often his treatment has been definitive; invariably it has set the artistic standard. Although we have not managed to follow this standard, he has taught us what economics should be. In trade theory Ronald Jones has not only helped to lay the foundations, he has also set a good example.³

I first heard of Ron Jones as a precocious second-year LSE undergraduate from Harry Johnson telling his M.Sc. students that they should not lose this opportunity to meet a visiting rising star in trade theory. I did not have the self-confidence to make an appointment. I heard him a year after I had joined the Johns Hopkins faculty: with Bela Balassa officiating, he spoke at the department’s General Seminar. His talk was spell-binding. I had heard Robert Solow speak at Frank Hahn’s seminar at the LSE – here was somebody as scintillating and as charismatic. Hugh Rose, my recently arrived colleague

¹Jones used this phrase for Lionel McKenzie, see Jones (2012) for a glimpse into this relation.

²I am grateful to Mrs. Catherine Jones for sharing this letter written by Professor Kowalczyk on November 19, 1993 to the Dean of the University of Rochester.

³See Ethier (1993) as cited in Khan (1993). Two subjects that Ron determinedly ignored were the Harris-Todaro hypothesis and descriptive and optimal growth theory, but see Jones (2010a) for the first,

from Rochester, was puzzled at my wide-eyed surprise – such Ron-performances were for him routine. Ten years later, when I heard my Yale teacher speak at the same seminar, I had a similar reaction – Marty Weitzman had given a Ron-performance. It was a period when I walked tall as a member of the profession I had joined.

But I did not really get time with Jones on his 1975 Hopkins visit. It was only on my 1983 Cornell visit that I received his seminar invitation. It was also the first time I met Lionel McKenzie. I remember his parting words when he walked me to my car, “Thank you for coming down – make sure to send me your expenses.” And all I could mumble in reply was that I would most assuredly not. I was floored by spending the day with this warm and (what I clearly saw to be) an exceptionally-gifted man, and this was a lame gesture of token appreciation I was offering when I had no other.

I walked with Ron Jones: not only in Rochester and Baltimore, but also in Islamabad, in Kyoto, in Singapore, in Vancouver. In 1992, in Islamabad he delivered the Quaid-i-Azam Lecture at the invitation of Professor Syed N. H. Naqvi, and in my discussion, I referred to Ethier’s use of the word “artistic,” and recalled Hildenbrand’s 1983 words on Gerard Debreu’s style and signature.

The striking feature that characterizes Debreu’s scientific contributions is that they are both general and simple – general in the sense of universal, in contrast to *ad hoc* specific or particular, simple certainly not in the sense of elementary, facile, or effortless, but in the sense of pure in contrast to the compound and complex.⁴

I invoked a distinguished historian of art to suggest exercises: (i) to see how Hildenbrand’s standards and criteria apply to the work of both of these general equilibrium theorists, and (ii) to use the single-mindedness of both these artists to reflect on the nature of the very enterprise of economic theorizing. And as I now mourn over his loss, I see the silver lining that such a retrospective of Jones’ *oeuvre* can now begin.

This memorial, written within a week of his passing, has been both disoriented and disjointed, a dropping of many names, and with nothing said about his contributions. Here I repeat two of the names: Ron Jones was especially proud that Stolper and Samuelson were both his teachers, and the footprint of the Stolper-Samuelson theorem runs all through his, and his students’, work.⁵ It is there in his three great *JPE* papers of 1965, 1971 and 1977, the last with José Scheinkman; and his famous 1971 paper on “theory, trade and history,” written independently of those of Wolfgang Meyer and Paul Samuelson, with follow-up work with Roy Ruffin, was written in counterpoint – the hat-calculus in full display in all.⁶ However, like I say, a fuller exhibition is for the future.

A few closing words about the man himself. His kindness and generosity of spirit hardly need mentioning: I satisfy myself by recounting three anecdotes of his ironic humour and a sense of mischief. He made me come up to Vancouver to introduce his Presidential Address to the Western Economic Association: with a twinkle in his eye, he

⁴See Hildenbrand cited in Khan (1993); Michael Fried is the distinguished historian and art-critic.

⁵See a reading of the 1965 and 1971 papers in Fujio-Khan (2006) and Khan (1980) respectively. For Jones’ own recollections, see Jones (2002, 2010a, 2010b, 2014) and a copy of his most recent (2018) CV.

⁶Ron was proud that Ket Richter, his MIT graduate school room-mate, would look up to him for help on mathematics. “I stopped,” he would say to me, “he ploughed on with results for all to see.”

said that it was the least I could do given his animated discussion in Islamabad of a paper of mine on education even before it had been written. Over the years, he reminded me of this on several occasions. I have heard him tease even Lionel McKenzie: after my talk on Lionel's contributions to Walrasian existence theory, he asked him, "Did you know that you had done all the things that Ali Khan says you did?" After a talk in Singapore, he came up to say to me, "Do you realize that you used the simple-complicated construction thirteen times!" He knew it to be a tick, and he had been counting.

Ron Jones will be sorely and grievously missed – he inculcated the love of a subject, and thereby a sense of purpose, in the lives of generations.

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