Chapter 4
Duncan Black (1908–1991)¹

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Biography

Duncan Black was born on May 23, 1908, in Motherwell, part of the industrial belt of central Scotland, located some 12 miles from Glasgow. He was raised in the quaint village of Tayvallich, Argyre, with its spectacular views of Loch Sween, in the same general area of Scotland. His father, a boiler-maker, was a Highlander, born in the Western Isle of Mull. His mother, a Motherwell Lowlander, owned a drapery and millinery shop until 1931, when the expansion of public transportation (buses) opened up the Glasgow stores to eager Motherwell shoppers and bankrupted her store (Rowley, 1991, p. 83).

According to Black’s former colleague Ronald Coase (1981), Black’s highly intelligent mother was the dominant influence in his life, followed by his Scottish Presbyterian upbringing. Both influences instilled in him a discipline and a work ethic absent which real scholarly achievement is all but unattainable. Black benefited from a rigorous and formal education then available for clever children of working-class parents (McLean, McMillan, and Monroe, 1996, p. xvi). He graduated from Dalziel High School in 1926 and enrolled at the University of Glasgow to study mathematics and physics, graduating in 1929 with a mediocre second class honors Master of Arts degree (the M.A. is the first degree in Scotland). Black’s interest in logic and pure mathematics had been disappointed by a degree program in which the approach was much more practical, geared towards engineering students (Coase, 1981).

Disappointed with this experience, Black contemplated a future career in the civil service. To this end, he enrolled in an M.A. course in economics and politics, also at the University of Glasgow, graduating in 1932, this time with a first-class honors degree. During this degree program, Black was influenced by the teachings of W.R. Scott, a distinguished economist whose interest was in the relationship

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between economics and philosophy, and most especially by A.K. White, a political scientist who fired Black with enthusiasm for constructing a pure science of politics, comparable to the general equilibrium analysis of economic theory.

In 1932, Black was appointed Assistant Lecturer in the School of Economics and Commerce at Dundee University, a School that had been established under the intellectual guidance of leading members of the London School of Economics (LSE) (including Sir William Beveridge). Not surprisingly, his three economist colleagues at Dundee, J.K. Eastham, J.C. Gilbert, and a very young Ronald H. Coase, had all been educated in economic theory at the LSE. They would provide the fulcrum for Black’s two-year exposure to a cutting-edge economic theory that simply was unavailable at the University of Glasgow.

In 1934, Black accepted a lectureship in economics at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, where he remained (except for a period of wartime duty as a member of the British civil service) until 1945. In 1945, he accepted a senior lectureship in economics at Queen’s College, Belfast, but one year later, in 1946, he returned to his alma mater, the University of Glasgow, also as senior lecturer in economics. In 1952, Black returned to the University of Wales, Bangor, as Professor of Economics where he remained until his retirement in 1968 at the comparatively early age of 60 years.

Black’s career pattern of movement between Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but never to England, was not uncommon among academic Scots of Black’s generation, partly because the structure of academic education differed greatly between the Anglo-Saxon heartland and the Celtic fringes of the United Kingdom (McLean, McMillan, and Monroe, 1996, p. xvi). An unfortunate consequence of this segmentation, as I shall explain in Section 2, was Black’s marginalization within the British academy throughout his academic career, a factor, no doubt, that led to his early retirement decision.

As Coase (1981) has noted, however, there was a much greater interest in Black’s scholarship in the more open, entrepreneurial, and energetic economics profession in the United States than in the United Kingdom during the middle years of the twentieth century: “once more, the New Word was called in to redress the balance of the Old” (Coase, 1981, p. 9). Black’s (1958) work on committees and elections quickly attracted the attention of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock at the Thomas Jefferson Center for Political Economy in the University of Virginia. Black first visited the University of Virginia as a Visiting Professor in 1962. In 1963, he was Visiting Professor in William Riker’s Department of Political Science at the University of Rochester.

Following his retirement from Bangor in 1968, Black visited the United States on many occasions. He was a Research Fellow in Law and Economics at the University of Chicago (1968–1969), and a National Science Foundation Fellow at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (1970–1971). He was a Visiting Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago in 1969, 1972, 1973, and 1976. He was a Visiting Professor in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University in 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, and 1976. These visits were a source of great pleasure for this neglected scholar, most especially his visits to