10 Eric Russell (1921–77): A Memoir*

The sudden death of Eric Russell at the early age of 55 on 26 February 1977 has robbed Australia of a great economist and a great Australian. His many friends are deeply shocked for he exuded the joy of life, both intellectual and physical; and they are greatly saddened, for he was such a loving and loveable man.

Eric had just returned from a wonderful year's leave at LSE where he had, as Bob Wallace put it to me, 'devoured an enormous reading list, footnotes, cross-references and all. He told several of his friends, with the . . . wondrous delight that [might be expected] of a bright undergraduate that “economics really is an incredibly interesting subject”.' I had set off for a term in Canada just before Eric returned. Friends have told me that in those few weeks back home Eric fairly bubbled with energy, ideas and fun. Refreshed and invigorated by the year abroad, he was eager to get back to his teaching and was planning how best to serve his colleagues, his students and the University as he took up the reins again as (elected) Chairman of the Economics Department at Adelaide.

Eric was a graduate in Arts and Commerce of the University of Melbourne (1943) and of King’s College, Cambridge (BA 1947, MA 1959). He obtained Firsts at both places; at the former, as a contemporary of Peter Karmel, at the latter with Frank Davidson, Harry Johnson, Robin Marris, I. G. Patel and Aubrey Silberston. At Cambridge he was supervised by Gerald Shove and Richard Kahn. When Peter Karmel came to Adelaide in 1951, he was quickly joined by his old friend, then lecturing at Sydney following a short spell at New England University College (now the University of New England). There, with Ron Hirst (who precedes us all), John Grant, Frank Jarrett and Bob Wallace, they created a remarkable department in the Karmel years of 1951–61. After the inevitable dispersion of many of its members in the great University expansion of the 1960s, the department had to be rebuilt. (Eric himself had become a Reader in 1958; he was appointed to the newly created second chair in 1964 and became Chairman in 1966). By careful selection and his own inspiring leadership, Eric played a unique part in that rebuilding process.

Eric’s intellectual loves were economics, history, literature, theatre and philosophy. He was a pupil of Wittgenstein at Cambridge and the most important early influence on him was the Cambridge philosopher, the late George Paul, who was then at Melbourne. The philosophers’ influence helped to make Eric a superb critic, gently but firmly probing his students’ and/or colleagues’ words or drafts for their *exact* meaning. No lapse of logic ever escaped him. The nuances that he could sense, both when you were wrong and when you were right, were splendid indexes of the fine quality of Eric’s mind. Also, as Al Watson reminds me, ‘He was very easy to talk to and left no bruises’.

Partly because of the amount of time which he gave to others, not only in Adelaide but all over the place – few people knew how much of his time was spent reading, commenting on and discussing other people’s work, selflessly and uncomplainingly – and partly because of the many shades of meaning of a question he could sense, he leaves little published work. A further reason was Eric’s natural modesty and diffidence. He probably also believed that teaching is what universities are principally about, that well-taught students are worth more than journal articles. Another clue may be found in a conversation that we had in either late 1959 or early 1960.

He told me that previously he had thought that once you had worked out a problem for yourself, to your own satisfaction, that was enough, there was no need to get it into print (as opposed to including the solution in your teaching). Significantly though, he added that he now thought he was wrong (though he was himself too old to change his ways). In fact, you can *never* be sure you are right until the ideas have gone through the process of being prepared for publication, vetted by referees and have met the test of being read as they stand by colleagues and contemporaries. There is an inevitable vulnerability about committing yourself in print that a scholar should be prepared to face up to. Resting on oral laurels is not really sufficient.

Nevertheless, in virtually all of the major economic issues of the post-war period – the wool boom of the early 1950s, the balance of payments and import controls, Australia and the Common Market, Australian wages policy, the economics of education, foreign investment, stagflation, the energy crisis – Eric’s was one of the first and wisest voices. His few papers are notable for their clarity, deep appreciation of the issues, soundness of diagnosis, humaneness of policy suggestions. They allow others to see what his students and colleagues knew – that here was a unique being with quite exceptional gifts. His qualities were perhaps best revealed in his letters. They were usually written, as Ken Inglis said in his address, ‘in that tight handwriting, sent when . . . needed, . . . and now to be cherished more than ever.’ When he went with a UNESCO mission to Zambia in 1963, his letters