In Memoriam

Wesley Clair Mitchell

1874–1948

When Wesley Mitchell started the National Bureau of Economic Research in 1920, the work and the teaching of economics were largely a speculative exercise. Concepts such as "normal value" and "marginal utility" held the center of the stage. Wesley Mitchell brought to this thinking a simple but radical program. Without minimizing the role of theory in economics, Dr. Mitchell held that it was possible to substitute fact for conjecture and tested conclusion for hypothesis. He developed what was, in my judgment, the most majestic research conception that any economist or group of economists has yet produced. By measuring and analyzing continuingly the central flows of our economic life, he undertook to find out "what has really happened" and "what is happening," and thus lay a foundation for the third question, "why?" No economist of our time has contributed so fundamentally to building a body of verified economic knowledge.

But the heart of my thought today is this: What did Wesley Mitchell, the man, contribute to Wesley Mitchell, the scholar?

In the social sciences the nature of the problems, the nature of the data, the less mature development of methodology, and the tremendous pressures on students to jump to conclusions, or to some special conclusion, make it inevitable that a larger share of the needed controls and defenses must exist in the character and spirit of the scholar than is the case in the physical and biological sciences. And Dr. Mitchell had those inner qualities that multiplied the value of his scholarship and enhanced its influence among all men.

Dr. Mitchell had one of the cleanest-cut, most analytical minds I have ever encountered, and a memory to match. His role was to discover truth, and its discovery remained a holy experience with him to his dying day. It was not enough to say a contribution was original or ingenious or plausible or logical. He insisted on establishing methods which would answer the ultimate question: "Is it true to life?" No matter how difficult, complicated, or costly in time and effort, Mitchell demanded the answer to that question. He was a perfectionist,—a determined, persistent, working perfectionist. The words which Dr. Arthur F. Burns, Director of Research of the National Bureau, recently used to describe the qualifications needed for fruitful empirical research in economics were, in effect, a description of Wesley Mitchell and his steadfastness of purpose and method:

> "He must have the patience to examine with meticulous care the economic coverage and representativeness of the statistics that lie at hand; the enterprise to seek out remote and inaccessible bodies of information; the imagination and technical skill to devise appropriate methods of relating, combining, reducing, or decomposing statistical observations; the personal industry or the clerical assistance to carry through these laborious operations; the common sense to make full use of nonquantitative information about commercial markets and processes; the conscience to test results repeatedly against fresh observations; the character to scrap results if error or unconscious bias is spotted; the fortitude to expose his materials and methods to the public's gaze; the wisdom to seek the help of others who might make his own best efforts obsolete."

The thing which stands out in my mind about Mitchell's work was its emphasis on quality and the thoroughness with which he did a job so that it did not need redoing by the next person who came along. The fundamental conception which permeated Mitchell's philosophy of work was precisely the conception that each man should be able to build on what went before without having to redo the entire structure. He believed and practiced the theory that the function of research people was to provide bricks for a building, and that each man should not take as his own job the building of the whole structure. To give one small example, I refer to Mitchell's little classic on index numbers. This is a subject on which a great deal has been written by a great many people. Much of the work has been more flashy than Mitchell's; yet his classic is by far the best thing available on the subject. He did a job that needed to be done, and he did it once and for all. He laid his bricks in a foundation upon which others could build firmly.

This emphasis on quality of workmanship as a prerequisite for making economics a cumulative science seems to me to be the most important element in Mitchell's methodological position.

A personal characteristic that strengthened his capacity to attain this quality was his ability to take criticism. Three years ago he told a colleague: "I hope I finish this job on which I am now working before I become too old to take criticism." I doubt whether any colleague of Mitchell's can recall when he ever took personally any criticism directed at himself; he always reached out to such criticism with eager

sympathy and an open mind. Where critical himself, he was never carpingly so, but always considered ideas and developments in their proper and therefore explanatory setting. And he expressed his own ideas with exceptional clarity and elegance. A great essayist was lost when Wesley Mitchell turned to economic reasearch.

So far, I have been discussing chiefly Mitchell's qualities of mind and character. I turn now to his more personal qualities as a colleague who was also a delightful human being. I think first of his humility. Once, when Moore's mathematical approach to business cycles was under discussion, a colleague commented upon its originality, and Mitchell replied, "I am not so brilliant and I find my mind moves more slowly." The impression he created on this colleague was that of a man who was modest to the point of humility about the capacity of his mind to undertake ambitious flights of imagination, and therefore of his imperative need to go step by step as the data revealed one connection after another. But Dr. Mitchell's humility did not prevent his doing an artistic job of calling a man down when he needed it.

With this undue modesty about himself, Wesley Mitchell had an inveterate respect for other scholars. His humility was fused with his optimism. This optimism was partly reflected in his respect for the human mind, partly implicit in his stress on empirical investigation. A man must be a fundamental optimist to believe that human intelligence, regardless of the limitations it has shown, can be firmly counted on to add something useful; to believe that all workers in a field deserve respect because they all contribute within their capacities to the ultimate result. And a man rejects preconceived prejudices and instinctive reactions when he stresses the importance of accumulating data and relating them, item by item, to increasingly relevant hypotheses for the understanding of social processes. Such a man must believe implicitly in human responsiveness to objective knowledge. I can explain in no other way the kindly readiness that he always displayed to assist younger workers who became impatient with the recalcitrance of the data, or who lost faith in the possibility of deriving beneficial conclusions from empirical study.

In spite of the tremendous discipline he enforced on himself, Mitchell was always ready to give of his time, his thought, and his work unsparingly to others. One friend said to me on his death:

"I did not know Dr. Mitchell well, yet I deeply feel his death. This is because of his spontaneous sympathy. He was really concerned with what you were doing and thinking, and he showed it. The few times I talked with him, always briefly, left me with a kind of renewal of spirit, a kind of resistance to a feeling of futility. If these brief and casual contacts would evoke such a feeling of fellowship, how much greater must have been his influence on those who knew him more intimately. It was the warmth of his personality that left its impression on me. It is my belief that in academic circles there is a certain tendency for older men to make casual encounters an occasion for impressing their own superiority upon their juniors. Dr. Mitchell did not do that. He assumed an equality that did not exist except on one level, the level of effort and aspiration. But that is perhaps the only sound level of human footing. It is my opinion that this trait has had much to do with the character of the National Bureau."

Wesley Mitchell was a man of integrity, of enormous tolerance, and catholicity of spirit. He was a scholar with a fairness and objectivity that no one ever questioned—a human being with gaiety and an infectious sense of humor. I hope that all scientists will read the lessons of his character and spirit, along with the lessons from his mind, and thus help to keep these qualities viable.

(In these remarks, made at the memorial meeting held for Dr. Mitchell at Columbia University, December 4, 1948, I have drawn freely, without specific acknowledgment, on conversations and correspondence with my own colleagues and former colleagues and friends of Dr. Mitchell's including Anne Bezanson, Arthur F. Burns, William J. Carson, Milton Friedman, Simon Kuznets, Frederick C. Mills, Roswell C. McCrea, Robert Warren, and Leo Wolman.)

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