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Three Memorial Addresses*

I

By John Maurice Clark

The mind refuses to take in the fact that Wesley Mitchell is no longer with us. He was such a hardy perennial, getting apparently no older for at least twenty years. Whether we saw him often or seldom, the benediction of his kindly presence has been a part of the setting in which we moved and thought, a source of help and counsel and a tower of strength, always available in almost any conceivable need. He was at once a most intensely human being and an institution, conveying an illusion of permanence. All this Columbia has lost. This country has lost its foremost economist, uncontested in that position for far longer than an ordinary academic generation. The world has lost the universally-admired leader of the great movement of inductive and quantitative economics which has been the outstanding characteristic of this generation.

When I was asked to speak at this meeting, I was concerned, because I was going to be forced to spend most of the intervening free time out of the country, where I could not draw on my colleagues to enrich my own inadequate store of recollections. My concern was needless. In leaving this country, I was merely moving into a different circle of Mitchell's friends and admirers. If time had permitted, I could have returned with formal expressions of esteem from the economists of the Sorbonne (of which he was an honorary doctor), from the Institut de Science Économique Appliquée (engaged in researches similar to those of Mitchell's own National Bureau of Economic Research), and from some of the staff of UNESCO. As it is, I bring informal and spontaneous expressions from all those sources, plus one revealing personal story

* Presented at a Memorial Meeting in the Rotunda, Low Memorial Library, Columbia University, December 4, 1948.

which was new to me, and which I am glad to be able to include in this tribute.

A catalogue of his public services and honors, at home and abroad, would be too long for this brief talk. I am less concerned here with his honors, or the specific contributions which merited them, than with what manner of man it was who accomplished these things: the personal and intellectual qualities and attitudes of which his professional work was the expression.

I met him first about 1913, when he came east after completing his epoch-making study of that year: a vigorous man close to forty, with a broad brown moustache, whose interest at the moment seemed to center on the question what, if anything, was wrong with a certain model of a machine for perpetual motion. We discussed this, and other things. To say that this one meeting sufficed to make me his warm friend and admirer, is merely to record that my reactions were normal.

The mutual friend at whose house we met was concerned as to whether his meticulous labors of statistical computation would yield results of distinction sufficient to warrant the enormous amount of drudgery involved. On that point I was able to reassure her. I realized that, where others had built simplified theories explaining how *some* kind of cycles *might* come about, Mitchell was adding something new by his determined and monumental effort to describe how *actual* cycles *do* come about, and what the phenomenon is about which others had theorized. At the time, I only dimly sensed the full significance of this great treatise, which was nothing less than the opening of a new epoch, not only for the study of business cycles, but for inductive economics as a whole.

But this is only one side of a many-sided personality. His essay on "The Backward Art of Spending Money" is an important contribution to the theory of choice which underlies value theory, though it was not paraded as such. It is constructive in form but subversive in its implications for rationalistic value theory. And in his essay on Bentham, he succeeded surprisingly in shedding new light on the thought of that great figure, on whom it might be supposed that the last word had already been said. It seemed that everything he touched must perforce emerge as a beautifully finished performance. His perfectionism extended to his hobby of

cabinetmaking, at which he set a high professional standard, and was eager that his shop in Greensboro should contain the best technical equipment. He accomplished enormous amounts of work, always with that deceptive kind of deliberateness which economizes time and energy by eliminating or minimizing waste motion.

Another angle of his personality is illustrated by a remark he made to me after the appearance of a book of readings on the economics of World War I, in which I had collaborated. Mitchell said, "Maurice, I hope you aren't going to get to doing useful things." Then after a pause, to let the remark sink in, "That book had nothing to commend it except its usefulness." He was ambitious for me, his friend, to do more fundamental work. Yet he himself spent enormous amounts of time doing useful things, and lending his aid and critical comment to the work of numberless lesser scholars.

P. W. Martin, author of *The Flaw in the Price System,* a precursor of Keynesian economics, says that Mitchell worked over three successive versions of this book before being satisfied that it was ready to go to the publisher. "Here was I, a rank outsider," Martin said, "and he treated me like a qualified economist and a coequal. When I visited him at Greensboro, I had the immense respect of the tyro for a master; and he went out of his way to disabuse me of ideas of his superiority. It was a remarkable demonstration of the genuine and incredible modesty of the man." He was too genuinely modest to act on the idea that his own studies were too important to be interfered with by calls to help others. And when Martin persuaded him that the drawing of charts on logarithmic paper could convey a misleading impression of the relative magnitudes of expansions and contractions, he scrapped large numbers of charts already drawn, and changed them to a straight arithmetic base.

Perfectionism, modesty, generosity and open-minded hospitality to new and heretical ideas—these make a strong combination; and they were all put back of a determination to build analysis on the most adequate factual basis that could possibly be managed. He himself has furnished the most revealing picture available of many of the elements in this combination of attitudes. I had undertaken to analyze his methods of studying business cycles, for a volume of

such analyses, edited by Stuart Rice; and as part of my preparations I had written to Mitchell, asking him some rather searching questions. In reply, he sent me an autobiographical sketch of his intellectual development, starting with his adolescent arguments over theology with his grandaunt. The letter was close to three thousand words long and so beautifully written as to be fit for publication without the change of a comma. Much against his desires, Mitchell was persuaded to allow this correspondence to be published, as part of the study which had occasioned it.[1] Its great value, naturally, lay in the fact that it had been written without a thought of publication, merely in a characteristically generous response to my request for inside information. More than anything else I know in print, it gives not only his typical mental attitudes, but the flavor of his genially pungent personality.

He was a puncturer of a priori beliefs, and insistent on verification. He delighted in Veblen's play with ideas, and upsetting of revealed orthodoxies, but he departed from Veblen's type of study, or at least went beyond it, in so far as Veblen was content to stand orthodoxy on its head, and to offer brilliant heretical insights, without undergoing the labor of systematic verification, and especially of measurement. These last were Mitchell's intellectual passion. He liked to be able to say of some heretical theory, not that he agreed or disagreed, but, "I think we can verify that hypothesis." However, his study of cycles was not cast in the mould of a verification of existing theories; his main method was to let the facts themselves give birth to appropriate analytical interpretation.

He was often drastically critical of the existing system, as well as of theories interpreting it as a rationalistic mechanism; therefore the "institutionalists" claimed him as one of them. But he was trusted also by more conservative elements, and all without the faintest taint of straddling. The secret of this miracle lay partly in his winning geniality and open-mindedness, but probably more in the rigor with which he kept opinions distinct from verified results. In the absence of verification, no one could quarrel with the tentative mood in which he entertained any hypothesis; and if he had verification that satisfied him, few could hope to overthrow his results.

[1] Mitchell's letter is reprinted above, pp. 93-9.

As ingrained as his meticulous weighing of evidence was his caution in drawing conclusions. This made him the despair of New-Deal brain-trusters seeking programs, and making the mistake of calling on Mitchell to furnish them, in his capacity as an outstanding scientist (thus selecting a peculiarly unimaginative and self-defeating method of attempting to make use of his unique and individual variety of talent). He could respond only with opinions; and to these he not only attached no special claim to validity, but was unwilling to proffer them where they were sure to be exposed to such misuse by others. But to organized governmental research and planning he could, and did, give freely of his time and energy and his great creative and critical gifts.

American economics has lost its undisputed first citizen, and his going leaves a gap of the sort that cannot be filled. Economists will continue, building on his work and on that of others as well—as he would have them do—subjecting new theories to the tests of verification. But his genuine greatness of spirit, and his unique personality, are simply and literally irreplaceable.

II

By Joseph H. Willits[1]

We are here to express our respect and affection for Wesley Mitchell, the scholar, and Wesley Mitchell, the man. But if that were our only aim I doubt whether he would have approved of this meeting; in fact, I can already imagine the color of embarrassed protest rising on his cheeks. We are here for something beyond that—we seek to acquire increased strength and discernment for ourselves and others by contemplating the qualities which made him unique. He was great in so many ways. Of his contribution to scholarship, I shall say little, since others on today's program can speak with more competence than I. But I agree with the

[1] In these remarks I have drawn freely, without specific acknowledgment, on conversations and letters from colleagues, former colleagues and friends of Wesley Mitchell, including Anne Bezanson, Arthur F. Burns, William J. Carson, Milton Friedman, Simon Kuznets, Roswell McCrea, Frederick C. Mills, Robert Warren, and Leo Wolman.

statement of the American Economic Association when he received their medal in 1947 that he made the greatest contribution to economics of our generation.

When the National Bureau of Economic Research was started 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," "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?

This is pertinent to the purpose of this meeting, for in the social sciences the nature of the problems with which we deal, the nature of the data, the less mature development of methodology, and the tremendous pressures (and incentives) on social scientists 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 with the natural 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 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?" No matter how difficult, complicated, or costly in time and effort, Mitchell demanded the answer to that question. He was a per-

fectionist, but he was not a dallying one. He was a determined, persistent, working perfectionist. The words which Dr. Arthur F. Burns used in a recent report of the National Bureau to describe the qualifications needed for fruitful empirical research 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.[2]

The thing which stands out in my mind about Mitchell's work was its emphasis on quality and the extent to which a job he did was done and 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.

[2] *Twenty-eighth Annual Report*, 1948, p. 7.

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 research.

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, and 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 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.

I have not mentioned Dr. Mitchell's deep integrity. In this audience it is not necessary. I tell merely one story related to me by Mrs. Mitchell after his death. After his illness had taken a turn for the worse, he said to his wife, "I want you to call Arthur Burns and tell him I am stopping as of today."

To encourage him, Mrs. Mitchell demurred, remarking, "You are entitled to sick leave."

His reply was, "This is different. Sick leave is for young men—not for old. I want Arthur to go right ahead looking for another staff member. I want no place saved for me. I want the work to go on."

It was for reasons such as these that people dropped bickering and intrigue when Wesley Mitchell entered a room and put on their best moral Sunday clothes. It is one of the reasons why bickering and intrigue have not characterized the National Bureau.

And now this friend—this modest, kindly and courageous friend

—this man of enormous tolerance and catholicity of spirit—this scholar with a fairness and objectivity that no one ever questioned —this human being with gaiety and an infectious sense of humor has passed ahead. I hope that social scientists will read the lessons of his character and spirit along with the lessons from his mind, and help to keep them viable.

III

By Shepard Morgan

Others have spoken of the long list of Wesley Mitchell's contributions to scholarship and of his extraordinary services in advancing the science of economics. They are more qualified than I to do so. What I shall aim to do is to remind us today of those traits of mind and spirit which were manifest in his daily behavior and gave to his work such a unique quality. These are the elements in a man's character which are imperishable, for they continue in being even after life on this earth is finished. The record of what he did gives tangible evidence of high achievement. But how he did it, and perhaps why he did it, infuses the record with a quality rare in our time, a quality which passes the bounds of the material and leads into the realm of the spirit.

It is impossible for one to enter into another man's mind and say in realistic and demonstrable terms what the motives were that prompted his actions and attitude. But I assure you it is more impossible for those who worked alongside Wesley Mitchell day by day, or for those others who saw him only occasionally through the years, not to know beyond question that the things he did and all he undertook were selfless, generous and gentle.

I recall, as many do who are here today, the words about him that were spoken at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the National Bureau. The speakers at those memorable meetings, who represented a fair cross section of the leading economic thinkers of the world, made him the central figure. Almost without exception the theme to which each reverted was the work done by Wesley Mitchell not only for the Bureau but for the science of economics as a whole. I remember glancing from time to time in his direction.

Satisfaction showed in his face, of course, but it was not self-gratification; instead he took all the things that were said as a merited tribute to his friends and co-workers on the staff of the Bureau, applying them only incidentally to himself.

One may find further illustration of Wesley Mitchell's modesty of mind and generosity of spirit in the things he did for the government in Washington. His mature years covered the tragic era of our participation in two world wars. Neither his age nor his qualifications warranted his taking active service in either war. Accordingly, the work he did for the United States was of the sort to which he was peculiarly adapted.

As a young man fresh from graduate work, some two decades before we entered the First World War, he had spent a year in the Census Office in Washington putting at its disposal his special knowledge in the use and application of statistics so as to reveal the year-to-year growth in the economic stature of the country. The quality of his academic work in following years made it appropriate, when the United States became involved in the First World War, that he should become Chief of the Price Section of the War Industries Board.

Again, ten years later, he was made Chairman of President Hoover's Research Committee on Social Trends. After the change in administration in 1933, his national service continued. He served first as a member of the National Planning Board, Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, and then a year later was a member of the National Resources Board.

In the Second World War he undertook, on behalf of the President's Committee on the Cost of Living, to make a technical appraisal of the cost of living index of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This was a singularly delicate task because at that time the validity of this index had been brought into question between labor on one side and employers on the other.

The work done for the government, as shown in this partial list, reflects his growing capacity and the increasing respect in which he was held. Taken by itself, the work was important but it was not dramatic. It was laborious but it made few headlines. Some of it touched tender spots but his findings were accepted. One may well ask why a scholar so thoroughly established and so deeply

immersed in scientific research should have consented to take on these tasks for the government. With his time already overcrowded, it would have been reasonable for him to refuse. Yet his sense of public obligation was such that he accepted, and always did his work well. One might also ask what special traits of character induced the government to ask him to undertake these tasks. There were other economists with adequate, if not equal, technical equipment who were available. The answer, I believe, is to be found in those special traits of character which were peculiarly his and which we recall with such affection today. Those traits were these —he could be relied upon to seek truth without bias, prejudice or self-interest. He would not bend his findings to suit political expediency or to further anyone's personal advantage, least of all his own. His technical competence, his balanced judgment and above all his unimpeachable integrity made it certain that his findings would not and could not be effectively disputed. These are qualifications for public service which are as compelling as they are rare.

Here at home, in Columbia and at the National Bureau, Wesley Mitchell's daily work revealed two sides of his mind which seemed to me when I first knew him to contradict each other. It was a long time before I was able to reconcile them, and to arrive at a conclusion which, to me at least, suggests why it was that he became the leading empirical economist of his time.

The side of his nature that was first revealed to me was his extraordinary generosity in dealing with the ideas and findings of other men. I remember well when I first met him. It was when he came down to the Reserve Bank to see his friend and my friend, Carl Snyder, whom many of us hold in affectionate remembrance. The time was shortly after the other World War, and I had participated in what I supposed was a great discovery, the cause for the sudden collapse of the foreign exchanges. I described it to Professor Mitchell. He listened intently and encouraged me to go ahead and test the theory out. I was pleased, of course, and was inspired to go further. He did not insist, as he might have, that the discovery was as old at least as David Ricardo. On the contrary, he established at once a friendship which lasted through many years.

This behavior was typical of Wesley Mitchell. His kindness to younger men, his generosity in considering what they had to say,

his constructive comments on their work, whether in the form of manuscripts or in that of the spoken word, his modest reticence with respect to himself, all conspired to make him a stimulating teacher and an inspiring leader. No man going to him for advice on work in progress or for approval of work done went away crushed. On the contrary, students and fellow workers learned from him how their products could be improved and the lines along which they could make further factual tests of their findings.

I do not recall ever having heard from him an unkind or ungenerous word about anybody. Neither do I recall ever having known him to brush aside as nonsense theories or assertions, however naive, partial or extreme. His attitude was rather one of inquiry, that these things might possibly be so, but that in any case they had to have factual support. His was one of the most receptive minds I ever encountered. He received the opinions of others with respect, giving them his responsive interest and the benefit of his thoughtful consideration. One always felt that his generosity of mind made him want to accept as truth the opinions of others, but that at the same time his basic integrity forced him to hold them in suspense until such time as they might gain factual support. And just as he required that the opinions and findings of others should pass the rigid tests of scholarship, so he demanded in double measure the same tests for his own work.

Here was the essential contradiction between the two sides of his nature, generosity and open-mindedness on one side and the severe disciplines of scholarship on the other. His breadth of mind, his receptivity, made him want to accept as truth the flashes of intelligence that came to him from conversation or from the deep wells of his own spirit. But he could not accept them as his own without being sure; much less could he certify to their truth.

Familiar illustration of this is to be found in his lifelong research in one of the most complex and baffling fields of economics. He believed that the answer could be found, and he devoted his mature years to finding it. He knew that if the problem could be solved and the solution applied, the benefits to human welfare and to our way of living would be beyond estimation. Yet in all he said and all he wrote he never overstepped the bounds of scholarship. He never permitted himself to set down half-truths which would

seem to convey whole truths. Yet he never would have gone so far with this work or done so much for the science of economics, if he had not believed that he—or if not he, someone else—would find at last the goal of his desire.

The tendency in this factual age is to appraise a man in terms of the material things he left behind him. We are too apt to overlook quality and consider volume of output. We subordinate aspiration to accomplishment. We measure the perishable and forget the imperishable. I have tried in these few moments, sometimes by reference to tangible achievements but more often by recalling traits of character that seemed to me dominant, to draw together some of the strands which made the unique texture of a rich and useful life. The qualities I have chosen to emphasize are qualities not of the world but of the spirit. They are as much alive today as when he was with us. I believe that he has carried them with him into the unknown and the unknowable.