

The life and work of Roy Geary (1896-1983)

Professor Denis Conniffe

Professor Colm Harmon

A quick diversion....



- Denis Conniffe was a towering figure in Irish economics and statistics - and a total gentleman.
- He would have just loved this conference!

Education

- Dublin born and bred, Roy Geary attended Primary (Elementary) and Secondary (High) School within a mile of this conference hall.
- 1913-1917: UCD. B.Sc. & M.Sc. First Class honours.
- 1918: Travelling scholarship to attend the Sorbonne (1919-1921).
- 1937: D.Sc. National University of Ireland (for his published work)

Career

- Outside of very short periods in mainly visiting roles Geary never held an academic appointment and career was wholly in public sector roles.
 - ★ *1922: Lectureship in Southampton – not clear if he took this up!*
 - ★ *1923-1949: Statistics Branch, Dept. of Industry and Commerce.*
 - ★ *1946-1947: Senior Research Fellow, Dept. of Applied Economics, Cambridge.*
 - ★ *1949-1957: Director of the CSO.*
 - ★ *1957-1960: Head of National Accounts Branch, United Nations Statistical Office.*
 - ★ *1960-1966: Director of the ESRI (and emeritus there until his death)*
- Distinction in being both a colossus of his field but also a major figure in Ireland's economics development and the emergence of fledgling agencies such as UN, Irish CSO and the Economic and Social Research Institute. Indeed, perhaps a hidden role in the first 'Celtic Tiger' era of the Lemass/Whitaker stimulated by trade/industrial policy.

Honours

- Three honorary doctorates (NUI, QUB, TCD).
- Honorary fellowships: Royal Statistical Society and American Statistical Association
- President: International Statistical Institute
- Council member: International Association for Research in Income and Wealth
- Elected Fellow of the Econometric Society (1951).
Council member (1962-1964).
- 1981: Boyle Medal of the Royal Dublin Society

Contribution to Statistics/Econometrics

- A stream of work throughout the 1930s and 1940s in particular - always with great focus (including a debate with Fisher on how mathematics has no place in statistics except in application).
- Sampling theory of ratios (1925, 1949b)
- Normality testing (1935 Biometrika, 1936a JRSS, 1936b Biometrika, 1947 Biometrika)
- Estimation of relationships where the variables are subject to errors of measurement/Instrumental Variables (1942, 1943, 1949 Econometrica)

Contributions to Economic Theory

- International Comparisons of Real Income (1958 JRSS)
 - ★ *Index number construction which is profoundly important to this day in how cross country comparisons are made.*
 - ★ *Literally thousands of regressions based on Penn World Tables owe construction of comparable data to Geary.*
- Real Income/Terms of Trade (Bruge & Geary, 1957; Geary, 1961, 1973)
- Stone-Geary Utility Function (Geary, 1950 Review of Economic Studies; Stone, 1954)
 - ★ *Two page note leading to hundreds of applications including intertemporal choice, trade-union behaviour*
 - ★ *Independently developed by Nash in his bargaining solution.*

Later Applied Work

- The later work was less 'important' in terms of academic impact and largely focused on applied policy....a great pity.
 - ★ *Geary - now in his 70's - focused on problems doing what we now call 'microeconometrics'.*
 - ★ *Also remarkable resources left behind and largely hidden - including extraordinary efforts to construct datasets from birth records and other historical data.*
 - ★ *Demography, population economics.*
 - ★ *Labour economics – employment, unemployment and migration*
 - ★ *Wage and price inflation*
 - ★ *Economic geography*
 - ★ *Social issues – health, housing, etc.*

Concluding Observations

- Most commentary on the career of Geary make some common observations
 - ★ *His passion was mathematical statistics - the work in economics was followed through with less zeal (though no less care or rigour) despite it's impact.*
 - ★ *Impact was constant focus - he showed a loathing for both 'literary economics' and economic theory, and the statistical work was always problem focused.*
 - ★ *'What if...?' Geary never held an academic appointment - no PhD students, no coherent structure to 'transfer of knowledge'.*