

*Eminent Economists II*, edited by Michael Szenberg and Lall B. Ramrattan, 2014, Cambridge University Press.

How might one appraise the historical value of a collection of autobiographical essays? Two approaches come immediately to mind, reading in depth or/and reading in breadth. A volume of autobiographical essays promises to be a trove of insights on the lives of economists of the late twentieth century. Each of the 29 essays of *Eminent Economists II* may earn a separate score depending on the curiosity of the historian and the candidness of the writer. And so I read *Eminent Economists II* for profit on the history of radical and postkeynesian economics, pausing at the essays by Paul Davidson and Anwar Shaikh. In this idiosyncratic instance, the essays gave me little beyond what I might source from my own interviews and from reading earlier published reminiscences by the two authors. The disparaging assessment might differ for historians probing other essays and historicizing fields of economics that are less self-aware and self-regarding than the heterodox community. An alternative answer to my opening question is to read the essays together so as to mark out the collective path of the sampled generation(s) of scholars. In a short foreword, Robert Solow reads across the essays to record the changing role of women in the profession, and the importance of policy applications in the work of all economists. By contrast, the editors' introduction is equivocal on what regularities to discern. They argue unconvincingly for the value of Karl Popper's situational logic as a meta-methodology for economics and conclude with a discussion of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism that bears no relation to the essays. The selection of writers including seven women, a few dissenters, and two Nobel laureates - Elinor Ostrom and Vernon Smith, who are far from conventional – makes for a pluralistic collective portrait of economics. The volume includes essays by micro and macroeconomists, by econometricians and economic historians, extending pluralism in profiles and beliefs to a pluralism in sub-fields. And yet, the advent and nature of the pluralism depicted is not elucidated by the individual essays, or by the introduction and or by foreword. Reading across the essays the sharpest message is the impossibility of claiming any lesson about the discipline in its entirety. The writers perceive their careers as blessed by good luck and disconnected with larger structures or trends. Their accounts are so infused by their subjectivity that even when the author should know better the results of collective and institutional action are credited as personal blessings or meritoriously earned. For instance, Clair Brown's life narrative does not acknowledge the efforts of women economists who organized to shame economics' gender record and to institute policies of diversity, and although Michelle J. White does acknowledge these campaigns, she then doubts the efficacy of the collective and moral action. Similarly, glimpses of career profiles, such as the pull of policy making on macroeconomists or finance economists' alluring exposure to consultancy, appear in these narratives as a result of personal choice and civic high mindedness, not as a feature of economics' professional jurisdiction.

To the above two approaches of reading individual essays with self interest or reading across essays for sociological insight, I add a third. I suggest that historians should be drawn not to what the book encloses but in the book as a cultural artefact. This is the fifth book Michael Szenberg has edited, the majority in collaboration with Lall B. Ramrattan, where they have collected autobiographical testimonies. The editors suggest that they have established a "genre". What genre is it? In format, nearly all essays begin with life stories, and either weave research interests into the narrative or what is more common, review their contributions in a separate set of sections, tucked near the end of the essay, once the colour of kin, upbringing and extracurricular activities have been dealt with. The genre lacks a coherent style. Some of the essays' prose is crisp and unaffected, Alan Blinder's

and Marina Whitman's opening and closing chapters being amongst the best. Most essays are not so gracious and read as maladroit self-authored letters of reference, wherein authors superlatively assert their standing in the literature and settle claims of priority and credit. In its themes, the genre casts light on professional matters alone. In this collection not a single essay stands out for drama, excitement, or political fierceness. These are not "worldly philosophers."

The original materials in the Szenberg collections were essays he commissioned as editor of the journal *The American Economist*, a publication of Omicron Delta Epsilon. Hence, the essays preserve the warmth of a fireside chat, of elders addressing youngsters from the comfort of experience. In this and other volumes, the essays at the same time humanize and lionize prominent academic economists and purport to show that everyone can be similarly "eminent." The embarrassment is that the surest lessons for "eminence" are: first, go to a top graduate school for your PhD; second, get a job at an elite research University; third, when you find your technical skills behind the curve convert into policy or consultancy. The guidance offered students is thus trivial. Perhaps aware of this problem, in this volume the editors set a less practical assignment. They asked for "life and work philosophies". In most essays this provocation was dealt in the opening pages by reference to upbringing and the experiences of undergraduate education. For instance, Richard E. Freeman tells an unusual causal story of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series priming the author for the discovery of Paul Samuelson's *Foundations*. Only Vernon Smith makes an outstanding effort at the assignment. At the middle of the book, an editorial board member of *The American Economist*, Avinash Dixit makes a mockery of the exercise. Not only does Dixit try too hard to be funny, sourcing puns from Douglas Adams, but he concludes by insulting philosophers as "complexifying questions" and never arriving at answers. Dixit's essay offers us a crucial hint at the goals and imagined circulation of this print object. It shows how the volume is addressed to the converted, casting aspersions on neighbouring disciplines and rife with namedropping. The editors note in the introduction (p.12) that "few will deny that the eminent economists provide methods and synthesis that make practical men and women secure in their activities in the daily business of living." Indeed once "we no longer criticize their work, we are apt to make it a part of our day-to-day curriculum of study and are disposed to accept and retain the knowledge they contribute readily." The impulse of this collection is thus to assert the work of academic economists as the foundation for the discipline's civic and commercial success and as the obligatory route for students own professional achievement.

Szenberg and Ramrattan promise the reader essays that are "inspiring, engaging, meditative, affecting, and even entertaining" and certainly many readers will agree, but what impressed me most from reading their volume was how strenuous it was for the writers to be introspective. The lives of these eminent economists were not normatively guided. The authors when faced with the task of giving reasons for their life choices came up with no structured or articulate answer. Instead many of them cautioned their younger readers with the wise counsel that life, resisting easy calculation or strategic reasoning, is "not like the models of economics."