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A PERSONAL SKETCH*

By Lucy Sprague Mitchell

This book is written by economists about an economist—Wesley Clair Mitchell. It is written by his colleagues—in the broad sense—who have felt the impact of his thinking and his work techniques in the world of their own thinking and work techniques. Those of his professional colleagues who knew him only through his writings wonder what manner of man he was. And those who knew him personally—casually or closely—those who felt that his qualities as a man were as rare and distinguished as his qualities as a thinker, tell me they would welcome further glimpses of the man they loved as much as they admired.

It is for both groups of his professional colleagues that I have undertaken to write this brief sketch of my husband. As far as possible, I should like to trace the external happenings in his life and of his characteristic attitudes and interests from his own words; that is, from his letters, from his diary which dates back to 1905, from the full notes he kept of many talks he gave and other unpublished manuscripts. A few glimpses of him as a man may help to build a human background against which to see him as a scientist.

I

Wesley Clair Mitchell was born in 1874 in the small Illinois town of Rushville and lived out his boyhood in various Illinois towns which were centers for the surrounding farm communities. Clair—as he was called as a boy and still is by his family and early friends—was the second child and the oldest son in a family that soon numbered seven children. His mother, who called him “Bonnie,” told me that she gave him this name because his cheeks were always so pink—as indeed they were all his life, seeming pinker still when his hair turned pure white in his seventies. He was an exceptionally

* Completed June 1950.

large, strong boy until, at fourteen, he had rheumatic fever. It may be that this illness checked his growth, for as a man he was only of average height though most of the Mitchell men are tall. But this illness did not seemingly reduce his physical energy though it left him with a heart murmur. Four years later, the physician at the University of Chicago who examined him as a freshman, made no inquiry about his medical history and wrongly diagnosed this heart murmur. He told Clair that he could not expect to live more than a year. Characteristically, Clair did not allow this startling announcement to sidetrack him from his studies. Nor did he mention it to his father, himself a physician, until he went home the next summer. Clair's account of his talk with his father as he gave it to me years later, is revealing of both. Clair said his father was indignant at the wrong diagnosis and reassured him about his heart. Also that Dr. Mitchell said, "Of course I knew you had a heart murmur and would have it for some time. But I saw no reason for worrying you about it as I knew *you were moderate in all your ways.*" The damaged heart gave him no trouble until he was seventy-three. As a boy, as a young man and into his seventies, he used his body vigorously and enjoyed it.

Family ties were very close within the Mitchell family and remained far closer than is usual after the children were grown and married and after both parents had died. This strong family feeling was developed by the practical situation in the home in which the boy Clair was brought up and even more by the intangible "atmosphere" of that home. His older sister says, "We lived on Mt. Olympus"—this, in spite of many financial worries and constant anxieties over their father's health.

Clair's father, John Wesley Mitchell, the eleventh of twelve children was born on December 30, 1837, at Avon, Maine, and grew up in the small nearby town of Strong. All the records (which go back to 1639) show the Mitchell men as fishermen or farmers of small, poor Maine farms, until we come to John Wesley. He broke sharply from the historic pattern of life among the Maine Mitchells. The external happenings in his life show what Clair described as his father's "vigorous initiative." Yet John Wesley lived all his life under physical handicaps resulting from two accidents which might well have crushed both his vigor and his initia-

tive. As a child of five, he broke his leg and from the injury developed tuberculosis of the bone. Useless on the farm, his father considered him a failure. John Wesley turned this personal disaster into an opportunity to get an education. He went to the Medical School of Maine, receiving his M.D. in 1863 during the Civil War; at once enlisted in the Union army; and, when he found the Negro troops were not receiving the same medical attention as the white, became at his own request surgeon of the 4th United States Colored Infantry receiving "the rank of colonel by brevet for meritorious service."¹ After three years of service, at the very end of the war, he was thrown from an excited horse and the hip of his already injured leg was crushed. From this second injury he never recovered. Nevertheless, he continued his medical training in the New York Medical College; went west; began the practice of his profession in Chicago, and there married an Illinois girl. Clair's younger sister describes their father as "an elegant gentleman, fastidious in dress and a delightful conversationalist. He was an avid reader and we kept library books at hand constantly."

Clair's mother, Lucy Medora McClellan, was born on a farm in Yorkville, Illinois, on March 5, 1847. Back of that statement lies a story of courage, successes and tragedies typical of family life in the pioneer days when the Middle West was being settled.² The story begins when, late in the 1790's, the James McClellans with four-year-old James Junior (Medora's father) traveled 500 miles by oxcart from Massachusetts to the unsettled "Chautauqua County" in western New York. The story relates how the McClellans, at Ashville, built the first sawmill, the village church and conducted a hospitable tavern where they entertained visiting ministers; how James Junior graduated from Hamilton College, New York; became a schoolteacher, married the first of his three wives and pushed farther west to Chicago. In 1838, he became "the teacher of the second school in Chicago with one assistant," the editor of the leading abolitionist newspaper and with other members of the family worked on the underground railroad. For a tragic time James moved to a farming community where his first

¹ *Bowdoin College Bulletin*, Obituary Number, June 1915.

² The facts of this story are told in the privately printed *Reminiscences*, by Beulah McClellan Seely, Wesley C. Mitchell's great-aunt.

wife died in childbirth. He married her younger sister, herself a schoolteacher, who also died in giving birth to her sixth child in ten years. Her fifth child, Lucy Medora, Clair's mother, was then three years old. She was adopted by her aunt, Beulah McClellan Seely, called Grandma Seely by the Mitchell children, the great-aunt with whom the boy Clair enjoyed discussing theology. Dora grew up in Chicago with the liberal-minded, well-to-do Seelys. She was educated as befitted "a young lady," largely in music and French, with a year in a school in Washington and one year, which she financed herself from a small inheritance, in Oberlin College.

It was to this sophisticated "young lady" that the impetuous Dr. Mitchell proposed marriage the first time he saw her. To be sure, he had seen her picture as a fifteen-year-old girl, when Medora's sister visited her husband Captain Parrington,³ at his army camp, and had corresponded with her during the war years. But they met face to face for the first time when Dr. Mitchell, then in a hospital with his crushed leg, "threw away his crutches and still using a cane, rushed to Chicago." Dora, though much impressed, said "to let matters stand as they were for a while." Whereupon the impulsive doctor "put on his hat, went out" and did not return or communicate with her for six years. When by chance he learned that she was still unmarried, he once more rushed to Chicago, this time from Des Moines where he was practicing. At this second meeting he again proposed and this time was accepted. Clair's mother wrote me part of this story when Clair told her of our engagement. For, curiously, Clair himself when he faced a similar situation showed something of his father's impulsive, naive behavior.

Clair's mother was a wisp of a woman—her children usually wrote her and still speak of her as "Dear little Mama." Her size did not suggest the wiry strength she must have possessed to take care of a husband who was sick so much of the time and bear seven children in eleven years. Or perhaps she was able to carry on through a combination of sheer strength of character, deep religious faith and unflagging devotion and belief in her invalid husband and her children. Clair describes her in a letter in 1910:

³ Their son, Clair's first cousin, was Vernon L. Parrington, author of *Main Currents in American Thought*.

She was always kind and courteous to her children—even when we merited sharp treatment. By way of serious punishment, she generally sent us to bed in the daytime. There we had abundant leisure to think over our sins, and when our mother came to talk the matter over she always found us sorry that we had grieved her. We were also supposed to be sorry that we had grieved Jesus, but I doubt whether we would have taken that to heart if he had not been in such close alliance with our mother.

In all her thinking she was far in advance of the times. She believed ardently in the rights of women, not merely political rights, but the rights to an education and a professional life, and the right to practice birth control. Her life externally was a difficult one but I am sure she would have described it as a happy one. She was one of the rare people who saw big things big and little things little. Religious herself, she had no impulse to put over her own beliefs. Clair as a child, along with the rest of the family, went to the Baptist church (his great-aunt's) and later to the Methodist (his father's). He was "immersed" in the traditional manner of the Baptist church. But his mother was not troubled that he went to no church after he grew up. Indeed, as I knew her in her later years, she had the same simple acceptance of people, the same interest in finding the good in them that I feel was so deep in her son. Apparently she transcended her difficulties—and they were many—with gaiety and with faith.

Family problems form the background of Clair's boyhood. The young married couple moved to Rushville where their two oldest children, Beulah and Wesley Clair were born. The family moved from one small place to another seeking better conditions for Dr. Mitchell's health and opportunities to eke out the slender family income through business ventures which Clair described as "verging on rashness." These experiments, nevertheless, were sufficiently successful to give the family comfortable homes and all the children adequate educational opportunities, five of the seven having college training. The family finally settled in the sizable town of Decatur, which met a number of family needs. There the children had better schools, a matter of prime importance to their parents. There they ran a fruit farm. Later they had a second house in town that was large enough to provide an office for Dr. Mitchell who

could no longer carry on the strenuous life of a country doctor and who now became a consultant. And Grandma and Grandpa Seely came to live in the big house on the outskirts of Decatur with the Mitchell family.

During this period Dr. Mitchell had recurrent acute trouble from his old army injury which kept him in bed "about half the time." It is of this period that Clair writes that his parents "could not help resting a part of family responsibilities on me, as the eldest son, far too early." Those responsibilities, which were increasingly shared by his four younger brothers, were carried on after school hours and during summers. They included work on the family farm and at one time, collection of rents from thirty small houses which Dr. Mitchell built as a business venture—a task which Clair told me he hated.

His older sister describes Clair as very shy at six when he first went to school clutching her hand. His shyness did not last long and his school record was always more than good. He had two favorite occupations when not at school or busy with farm work—collecting butterflies and reading. All his life he looked at butterflies with a collector's eye and always he remained an omnivorous reader like his father. When in the Decatur High School, he and another, older boy competed for first place both in academic honors and in debates—debating was an interest he carried over into college years. When it became known that a great university was to open in Chicago in the fall of 1892, Clair determined to be there though the local high school could not prepare him for the entrance examinations. His mother early recognized Clair's intellectual quality and resolved that no home exigency should interfere with his education. So Clair went for the spring term to a preparatory school at Morgan Park near Chicago and worked up necessary subjects by himself during the summer. In the fall he entered the class of 1896, as a freshman. During some of these years Grandma Seely took a house in Chicago to make a home for Clair and his two sisters.

Clair told me that when he entered the University, he thought his chief interest lay in the classics. Veblen and Dewey made him think otherwise; indeed for a time he wondered whether philosophy or economics interested him most. It was Dewey, whom he

called "the first behaviorist," who first stimulated the idea that economics was, or should be, a study of human behavior, and Veblen who first stimulated the idea that economic theories, past and present, were cultural expressions of the times in which they originated. Thus, in a very genuine sense, going to the University of Chicago marks the conclusion of one life, and the start of another which was to continue to the end.

II

Fortunately, Clair was a great letter writer. In October 1911, he wrote me a long letter analyzing his "temperament" and his development against the chief events and influences of his life up to that date. This letter reveals so clearly his attitudes towards his work and life in general that I feel I should share it with his colleagues even though it was written for me and me alone. I should, naturally, prefer to keep our personal relationship out of this biographical sketch of him. Yet, in fairness to him, I must explain his reason for writing the letter that follows, for he was not given to writing or even to thinking about himself and his development.

This, then, is the stage-set that evoked the letter. We were both in love: he knew it, I was uncertain. He was 37 and Professor at the University of California: I was 33 and Dean of Women and Assistant Professor of English in the same University. He was in Berkeley working on the last chapters of his first book on Business Cycles: I was on a leave of absence in New York, investigating professions for women, hoping later to persuade the University to prepare its women students for some professions other than teaching. He was maturely focused, single-minded of purpose and completely aware of what he wanted to do and why: I, though I had already decided that I wanted to approach the problem of education through the study of children and had handed in my resignation to take effect the following spring, was still unfocused, hesitant about marrying a man so firmly tied in with the academic world which I had found disconcertingly narrow in many ways. I had told him my doubts and had called him "academic" and "unaggressive." But in fairness to myself, I must say that my replies to this letter show I did not mean unaggressive intellectually as he

thought. Rather I was thinking of his puzzling behavior which recalls his father's already described. In 1907, he had asked me in one letter to marry him and I had answered "no" in one letter. He had made no further move for four years. When I left for New York, I had asked him to write me about himself since, through the years that we had been friends, he had told me little. Here is his conscientious response with the personal ending omitted.

2250 Prospect Street

October 18, 1911

Dear One—

This is to be the letter about myself. I write it at once because I like to get the less agreeable things done promptly and to save the more agreeable—writing about you—for the future. The task is neither easy nor congenial. I do not talk much about myself because I am not in the habit of thinking much about myself. My mother used to discourage "self-examination" as a religious exercise on the ground that it makes people morbid and ineffective. Perhaps for that reason I have never made a practice of trying to assess my qualities and defects. But in the past week I have tried to take account of stock on your behalf. Doubtless you can read more between the lines than I can write in them; but, to be read between, lines must be written—and the more conscientiously they are written the more significant is the interlinear reading.

What I have to make clear is my character; but I begin with autobiography. For the life which I have led expresses my leading interests. I have not been much pushed and pulled about by things which have happened to me. Rather, I have deliberately chosen the life in which certain kinds of things were likely to happen, and as deliberately refused, after a little trial, several opportunities which led toward a different kind of life. My character has determined my life much more than my life has moulded my character.

You know something about my parents—my mother's affectionate wisdom, my father's vigorous initiative—verging on rashness in business affairs—and the love and admiration which they have inspired in their children. The tragic element in our family history came from my father's recurring illnesses with his wartime wound. A man without indomitable energy and a woman without the most steadfast courage would have broken down under the strain while their children were all little and helpless. Such strength of character as they possess I've never found elsewhere. But they could not help resting a part of family responsibilities on me, as the eldest son, far too early. I had to think about money matters, to learn the hard side of life, when

most children are free from care. No doubt this fact strengthened my bent for reading and the world of imagination which reading helps to enlarge. I needed a refuge from anxieties which a boy is not strong enough to carry, and I found it by snatches in our old library.

Somehow we managed to send Beulah to the Art Students League in New York and to send me to college in Chicago. Of course to a boy of my experience and temperament college was a shining opportunity, not a dull duty. The life was so free from care, the courses so full of interest, the tasks so easy! My freshman year was rather overcast by the stupid examining physician who found a fatal murmur in my heart. But after my father had set that delusion at rest everything went well. My one anxiety was lest the family should need me so much at home that I could not fairly return. But after hard work on the fruit farm—to which we moved about the time I left home—in every vacation I always found some way of coming back to the university in the autumn.

A more serious crisis came with graduation. I knew definitely that I had found my work in research (I am still trying to live down a paper published while in my senior year); but I did not want to tax the slender resources of the family further, and I did not want to stop serious work in order to earn money. Just at the right time, however, Mr. Dewey offered me a graduate scholarship in philosophy and Mr. Laughlin a fellowship in economics. I knew how to live on nothing a year and was rich on \$320. The next year they sent me to Europe on a traveling fellowship and the year following made me a doctor. I still like to remember—tho not to tell of—the *summa cum laude*.

Once more I faced a turning point, and knew which way I was bound to go in the end, but found an obstacle in the present. There seemed to be no positions open for Laughlin's fledglings. But Laughlin was gathering materials for his *Principles of Money*, and knew that he ought to read a lot of hard German books on the subject which he had been neglecting for years. So he employed me at \$20 a month to assist him, and I had finished his Italians as well as his Germans when an opening turned up in the Census Office.

That year in Washington, 1899-1900; taught me that I could never be happy except as my own master. Our small "Division of Methods and Results" was organized much like a statistical seminar, and Willcox of Cornell—the chief—was a most open-minded and considerate person. But I kept finding my *own* problems and nursing my *own* interests. They seemed to me, of course, much more vital than the work laid out by the Census Office for us to do. Moreover the servility of Washington clerks nauseated me, and the feebleness of the official representatives of economics in several bureaus where I became acquainted almost frightened me. I could not live in such a

community without having to fight a battle with myself every day for self-control. You may imagine how I jumped at the chance which came in the autumn of 1900 to return to Chicago as an instructor. There I knew I could do what I liked and develop as I chose. The smaller salary in Chicago and the promotion which Willcox offered in Washington did not make me pause even long enough to get the best terms which I found later Dr. Harper was ready to grant me.

Teaching proved easy, but it did not give free scope to initiative and I did not become so much interested in it as in research. Most of my energy during the two years which followed in Chicago went into the *History of the Greenbacks*. There was one episode which might have diverted me into another line of work if I had cared to follow it up—writing for the *Tribune*. It began with my going to Pittsburgh to give an account of the strike of the Amalgamated Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers against the newly-formed Steel Corporation. I did this work with more facility and success than I expected, and after I got back Mr. Patterson employed me as an editorial writer. For some months I sent in articles rather frequently, and always had them printed. But I found that newspaper work required more compromises with my standards of thoroughness than I cared to make, so that I had small regret at giving up this connection when Mr. Miller asked me to come to California.

The latter change satisfied me so heartily because I found even more freedom here than in Chicago. I was allowed to give just the courses I liked, to try my own experiments, and to learn from my own blunders. One of the latter was wasting too much time for several years in dining out. But I was all the time getting deeper into my own set of problems—and becoming stupider for social purposes—so that by degrees I found my proper place. The earthquake shook me out of it for a month or two. As Devine's assistant at the Red Cross Headquarters I had a brief but strenuous experience of executive work. Again as superintendent of field work for the Immigration Commission during the period of organization I had to manage an office and to manage all sorts of people. Both tasks seemed easier than the kind of work I had been accustomed to, and both were interesting. I think I did well at both—Devine and the Immigration Commission said so at any rate—but I did not feel that this kind of effort is so well worth while as the tasks I had found for myself.

For this reason I was glad to leave the government service after a few months of organizing and go to Harvard. I've told you why the year there disappointed me. The atmosphere of the place was strong enough to affect my own standards. For a year I was primarily a teacher and only secondarily an investigator. Then I learned better than I had known before that I cannot content myself with doing

routine work or with carrying out the plans of others. I might have fought myself free of the obsession by "Harvard College" if I had remained in Cambridge for a year or two; but the struggle would have involved waste of energy and I was glad that Mr. Wheeler gave me the increased salary I needed for my brothers' use and let me return to California.

* * *

You see that this whole story turns upon my temperament in the last resort, and more immediately upon the specific direction which my mental development had taken as a result of temperament. I had to have my own way about the things for which I cared, and provided I could do that the details mattered little. Further I was bound to have my own way without continually fighting for it. I detest the feeling of anger which serious opposition rouses in me, and I am always ready to let others do as they like in small matters rather than to waste time in trying to persuade them that my ways are better. These traits make me a poor subordinate, but an agreeable colleague. Provided I am given free scope to do the kind of work I like in the way which I please, I can gladly let someone else have the nominal leadership and arrange the details to suit himself. Indeed I carry both traits to excess. My essential independence mounts to arrogance and my complaisance in small matters sinks to carelessness.

The specific direction in which I have insisted on having my own way showed itself in my college days. When Laughlin started me off on the history of the greenbacks he expected me to produce one of the standard pieces of academic criticism, showing the silliness of the paper-money issues. But as I worked into the materials I worked away from his viewpoint. What seemed significant to me was the long chain of events which constrained the federal government to develop a policy which no one had planned. To stand apart and distribute praise or blame from an academic retreat some forty years later struck me as betraying a curious lack of intelligence—a failure to understand the real problem. Then I got interested in the consequences of the legal-tender acts and had to invent ways of measuring their effects. In all I put several years of hard work on the subject and made what was intended to be a brief dissertation into a considerable volume.

Mr. Laughlin soon gave me my head in this matter, but we clashed again over my "minor" subject. He wanted me to take history or political science, I wanted to take philosophy, which as John Dewey represented it struck me as enlightening. I had the grace to try his way; but after trial I had the courage to insist on my way. Of course I got it, and having gotten it went on into ethnology.

When I came to California I still had the proofs of the *History of*

the Greenbacks to read and the plan of a continuation from the close of the war to the resumption of specie payments to execute. While I was working on the latter, the ferment of philosophy and ethnology was gradually widening my notions of what economics ought to be. I held to my old tasks long enough to complete the statistical apparatus for the second volume on the greenbacks and to publish it as *Gold, Prices, and Wages under the Greenback Standard*. But I wanted to be at something larger in its scope and more penetrating in its interest than this detailed work with a passing episode in monetary history. My rather vague notions gradually crystallized into the idea that the important matter to understand about money is the money economy—that is, the cultural significance of the highly organized group of pecuniary institutions, how they have developed since the middle ages, how they have gained a quasi-independence, and how they have reacted upon the activity and the minds of their makers.

So I began speculating, re-arranging familiar data, and collecting fresh materials in a new direction. The immediate result was a pile of MS. which never seemed quite satisfactory and which I have not wanted to publish. Meanwhile I began to look back on economic theory from the viewpoint of my particular problem, and at the same time to become enmeshed in its most technical phase. The result of the first diversion was the paper you read this autumn upon "The Rationality of Economic Activity"; the result of the second was the decision to work out the subject of "Business Cycles" as a *Vorarbeit* of the "Money Economy."

What lends significance to this experience in my own eyes is that by following my own bent I have found out what I am fit for, and brought the support of a reasoned conviction to my temperamental craving for having my own way in fundamentals. What I think is worth while is to accomplish some of the necessary pioneer work toward the construction of useful economic theory.

My case for economic theory and my justification of my conduct—the latter like most excuses was manufactured after the offense was committed!—run as follows: Ethnological studies have given me a peculiarly strong impression of the practical value of theoretical knowledge in human affairs. But to be of use theory must take hold of phenomena by their handles. Much the most effective handles are found in causal interconnections. In the latest fraction of human history we have made rapid industrial progress because we have learned how to formulate our knowledge of physical and chemical phenomena in these terms. But in all matters of social organization we remain backward; we don't know how to recast our inherited ways of treating each other with anything like the success

we have had in recasting our inherited ways of treating materials. It is not lack of will that impedes progress, but lack of knowledge. We putter with philanthropy and coquette with reform when we would fain find a definite method of realizing the demand for social justice which is so strong an element in human nature. And tho we are so often discouraged by the futility of our efforts, we stick manfully to our tasks and try to do what little we may to alleviate at retail the suffering and deprivation which our social organization creates at wholesale. What we need as a guide for all this expenditure of energy is sure knowledge of the causal interconnections between social phenomena.

Such knowledge we have little chance of getting while we are immersed in our daily tasks, whether these be the tasks of philanthropy, politics, or business. The "reformer," indeed, strikes me as being in about the same predicament as the practicing physicians of two generations ago. These men were doing work which someone had to attempt, with a professional air of confidence which they had to assume for the benefit of their patients, and with an ambition to learn from experience. But the progress of medical science has not come from them. Instead it has come from the laboratories, where the issues of life and of death in individual cases are replaced as the immediate object of attention by little problems of chemical reactions and bacteriological detail for which the busy practitioner had neither time nor patience. So must it be in other subjects. If we are ever to have an economics of use in guiding our efforts at social reconstruction it must come from men who find some way of resolving the vital social problems into simpler elements. And these won't be the men who are doing their manful best to bear the burden and heat of the passing day.

Whether there is good prospect of accomplishing any results in economic theory within the present generation I am not sure. But it is certain that we cannot do anything unless we try to do something, and it is probable that our blunders will prove instructive to later students. I have sufficient confidence, at any rate, to believe heartily in the line of effort into which I settled long before I had much notion of its bearings. Indeed, I think this task is more important and more vital, as well as more difficult, than the tasks of the people who are running the existing social machine or of the people who are trying to patch it.

* * *

But I also know that few men could be found with more than a smile for my pretensions. This troubles me at times; for I like sympathy and recognition. If I had achieved any solid results of immediate practical value I might go forth to fight for them. But there is

no use in proclaiming aloud a program of critical research, when you are not sure that any of the leads will repay working. Here the prospector must go off quietly by himself and develop his claims before he can get recognition. And if the claims don't pan out well, he'll have to find his reward within himself—or go without. It is hard to stand for something which other men do not recognize—particularly if you happen to be acutely sensitive to the opinions and feelings of others. But my sheer natural fondness for creative investigation and my conviction that the particular jobs in hand are vastly important hold me to my place without much wavering.

Do you really think that this attitude towards life is “academic,” or “unaggressive”? To me the essential feature of the academic man is that he delights in following the conventional habits of thought laid down for a scholar. He may do a little additional work along the accredited lines, but he feels no call to test all things for himself, and still less call to create anything new. Outwardly I live in the accredited academic fashion, and doubtless I have insensibly acquired through long association pedantic modes of expression. But spiritually I acknowledge no kinship with these passive folk. My world is the world of thought; but the world of thought has a realm of action and I live there. It is a place where one has to depend upon himself—his own initiative, his own sustaining faith. My danger in this realm is not from lack of vigor, but from lack of caution.

* * *

Dear Heart I hope this long recital and analysis has not made you so weary as it has made me. I am tired of telling what I'm good for, of making claims. I'd rather be at work than to be talking about it. But now I'm done with all that part of me. And you know the other parts—those that I show to the world and those that have blossomed for you alone. I must do my work as best I can under any circumstances; but . . .

This letter is a young man of thirty-seven speaking. The significance of his thinking and his special and technical work within the field of economics as revealed in this letter, I properly leave to his fellow economists.

Yet I cannot set aside his thinking as something that concerns only economists. I know—for they have told me—that scientists in fields other than economics regard his thinking as a major contribution to the scientific thinking of his generation. Some say that he dealt with social data in a fresh way; that he pioneered in trying to establish a scientific approach to social reconstruction. He al-

ways saw his work in the field of economics against this broad background of future scientific planning of social organization.

To me, the letter also reveals the man I married seven months later—the man as I knew him throughout the rest of his life. By temperament and conviction, he was a scientist. By profession, he was an economist. By necessity, he was a statistician. To me, this letter reveals the vision which was woven into the very fabric of his life—and so into mine. Always a deep concern for the improvement of our social organization was the end and aim of his work. Always he was driven by a vision of what the social sciences might become, what contribution economics could make if it were approached in a scrupulously scientific attitude and by scientific methods. Always this dominating vision kept him at tasks involved in his *Vorarbeit*, his work on business cycles. Statistics, which he never really liked and of which he never felt himself a master, he developed as a tool—a means to his end, never as an end in themselves. In many letters and in the full notes he kept of scores of talks, I find him holding consistently to his deep beliefs, adapting his approaches to the special interests of a wide variety of audiences, professional and lay.

Always at heart he was a theorist, but a theorist with a “sheer natural fondness for creative investigation” who believed that theory must be based, not on “assumed premises,” but on analytic study of observed and recorded human behavior. Listen to his own account of how he felt when he was first trying out on an impressive scale a scientific method of making such a study of economic behavior. Here is an excerpt from a letter written to me a week after the long biographical one:

. . . But I've been getting deeper into Chapter X and feeling by snatches that it promises well. This theoretical part of the book—my subtitle for it is “The Rhythm of Business Activity”—is more diverting than the earlier parts in which the task was to cull suggestions from the writings of others, to compile the annals of business, and to interpret statistical tables. Now all these earlier things are just materials and I am in the full swing of imagining the big complicated processes by which a revival of business activity develops into high prosperity. Of course the imagination professes to—and does mainly—rest upon what the detailed work has taught me; but it goes with a wilful sweep of its own which is delightful to feel. Maybe I'll smash my wings

presently on some obtruding fact, but for the present the path of flight seems clear . . . (Oct. 23, 1911)

In still another letter he tells me what plans for future work and writing he had at this time. This letter, like the autobiographical one, must be read with our personal situation in mind:

. . . The only difficulty that I can see concerns the place where we can begin life together. You want to live in New York and are free to do so. I want to live in New York, but have no opening there at present. Berkeley has been a good place for me during the past few years because of its freedom. Left to myself I've been able to find my own set of problems better than I might have done in a place where people were continually trying to get me to take up their problems. But now I think I am oriented. The processes I want to study, the men and institutions I want to observe, are better represented in New York than anywhere else in the world. The book on "Business Cycles" I could do anywhere that I could assemble the statistical data, find competent computers, and have leisure for analysis. For that on "Types of Economic Theory" I need a different sort of intellectual companionship from what I have here. Since Veblen left Stanford, and still more since Young has gone, I've nobody left who both understands and is keenly interested in what I am trying to do. Mr. Miller is the only one who might help me much but he does not care enough about the subject. For the "Money Economy" still more I shall need a chance to come into contact at first hand with the workings of pecuniary institutions and to observe how the minds of the men who control the powerful business enterprises are formed by their daily tasks. . . . As soon as I can get a decent opening in one of the schools there I shall go to New York, even if you don't marry me. . . . (Nov. 6, 1911)

The three pieces of work and writing that he thus outlined were so closely interrelated as to be aspects of the one inclusive problem of understanding our total modern economy. In a letter from Harvard as early as November 9, 1908 when he was working on the "Money Economy," the MS. he never published but parts of which he used in *Business Cycles*, he wrote:

I conceive the money economy as a complex of interrelationships on a pecuniary basis which has resulted from a long process of evolution. . . . To show how slowly the money economy has been evolved, and to indicate how closely its advance has been interwoven with other phases of civilization, will prepare readers to accept my interpretation of its place as a factor in modern culture. . . .

This of course is economic theory. Economic theory is implicit and often explicit in all his work and his thinking, whether he is talking directly about social organization or about the "most technical phase" of the "particular problem" in which he had "become enmeshed." He investigated the subject of business cycles because he believed it to be a strategic manifestation of the money economy: he believed the money economy to be basic in our total modern economy: he believed knowledge of the workings of our money economy a necessary basis for intelligent planning of a social reorganization.

When he died at 74, he had not quite completed what he thought of as his particular share in the series of publications of the National Bureau of Economic Research relating to business cycles. He still had to write the final analytic chapter in the book on which he was then at work, and after that still one more volume. His dream—long postponed—was that he could then turn his full energies to completing a book on economic theory which he had begun almost as soon as he caught his breath after seeing his first big book on business cycles through the press. In his diary, he usually called the book "Types of Economic Theory," a title he had used for some time for one of his courses. Among his papers are a number of versions of Introductions to a book which indicate that he planned this book on economic theory to extend through modern times and that the MSS., organized under chapters, which he left grouped together with these introductions under the heading of "Classical Economics," were intended to be the first part of this book. In these MSS. he shows that his interest in the theories of the classical economists, beginning with Adam Smith, was not to indicate whether they were "right or wrong," but to indicate that economic theories are responses to the thinking and problems of the times in which they arise. This writing, which was abruptly interrupted by the war years, he returned to for a time after the war but never completed. Though he published the chapters on Bentham and Ricardo as articles, he was never willing to publish these MSS. on Classical Economics as a book, since he regarded them as fragments of a book he still hoped to complete.

In his last years, he spoke often of this unfinished book. Like a pioneer who at last can turn to tilling fields and raising crops on

the lands he has explored, he looked forward with eagerness to writing realistic theory based on "established knowledge" about modern culture. But this fuller, more systematic statement of theory based on years of patient study of economic behavior was never written.

I find it difficult to separate sharply the scientist in him from the man. Just as one feels the man in his thinking, so one feels the scientist in his personal life. Everything he did was "just like him." Far more than do most people, he carried the same characteristic attitudes into his work, his human relations and other life situations. He did everything intently, with his whole heart and mind. He was steadfast in the work he saw for himself to do. In a letter he says, perhaps defensively: "To work well is to practice virtue; to do much work is to have strength." He was steadfast in his friendships. Alvin Johnson writes me: "In the forty-five years since first we met I have known many scholars who had the honor of being accepted by Wesley as friends. I have never known one who ever discovered a flaw in his friendship." He was always just himself—honest in his standards of work as in his friendships, with a singleness of drive but a breadth of interests. He was essentially a simple person for all his intellectuality.

Early in his long letter to me he says: "My character has determined my life much more than my life has moulded my character." To me, this is a confident, a secure remark. And to me, he always seemed a confident, a secure man. The home in which he grew up may not have moulded his character; but this home did give him warm approval and support which allowed his character and his temperament to develop unhampered. Yet, as so many of his friends have said, he had modesty—which never was tainted by self-depreciation—in as much as he thought much about the value of a piece of work and seldom about the value of his own contribution to it. Again, as so many people have remarked, he had humility in his own work. But that does not mean he did not value it. He did. Rather it means he had the vision to see the problems he attacked in their largeness and fullness. The glory of it was that this vision did not hamper him. He had the unhesitating high courage to attack these problems no matter how difficult, no matter how far short of the ultimate goal he knew his work must fall. A friend

describes him as "a man who faced, mastered and enjoyed his world." He accepted himself quite simply. And this acceptance gave him confidence and security that freed him to use his powers to the full. It gave him a rare kind of simplicity which to me is the fundamental quality he showed in all life situations, the quality that made him great both as a scientist and as a man. It is this quality which I should like to show in various situations, big and little, which life brought to him from childhood to his death at seventy-four years of age.

III

How, then, did he show his characteristic attitudes towards his work, towards people, towards other life situations? What were his work habits, his play habits, his interests and activities? In answering these questions, I shall draw on my own memories, checked wherever possible by the records that both he and I made during our long life together. And, as I always did, I shall call him "Robin"—a name born in the high Sierra before our marriage and adopted by later family friends.

I think first of the external planning of his day. Robin was orderly. Or perhaps "methodical" is a fitter word, for orderly in the sense of neatness certainly did not apply to his desk or bureau drawers though he always knew where to find anything in the apparent litter. He rose and went to bed on schedule. He wished to be at his desk not later than 9 o'clock. In winter his writing schedule was often interrupted by appointments with people on one or another of the many committees on which he served. But in summers at Greensboro, Vermont, barring family emergencies or hurried trips to Washington or New York, he sat down at his desk as punctually as he did for breakfast. Before beginning his work, he wrote up his diary of the preceding day. This diary, entered in the cramped space of pocket appointment books, runs consecutively from 1905 to within a few weeks of his death. It is a bare factual chronicle of happenings. In the earlier years he records many social events: walks in the Berkeley hills (companions, mileage, time); dances (with whom he danced); tennis games (with whom he played and scores); people he dined with, talked with,

wrote to. Here one sees the young man he describes as "wasting too much time for several years in dining out." Part of this was youth: part of it, he tells me in other letters, was loneliness though he had many friends. These early diaries, however, also record what he was working on the day before, what he wrote and how much. These records and letters of this period show the careful habits of a work-centered young man who, however, was ready to give time, always precious to him, to family and friends. Here are some illustrative diary entries:

1910: May 15 Wrote 8 letters asking support of Veblen's application for grant from Carnegie Institution (of Washington). Dined at La Loma⁴ w. E. C. Moore & Lewis Moore. Evening the Tinnemanns brought completed work of tables of pf stocks. M. C. Campbell came for instructions regarding statistical work. Ryder called in evening.

The following excerpts show his characteristic way of writing—rapid first drafts, revised many times. The first four entries were made when he was on vacation at Lake Tahoe:

1910: Aug. 3 Began article on Backward Art of Spending
 Aug. 5 Finished first draft of article
 Aug. 9 Began revising article on Spending Money
 Aug. 13 Finished revision of article on Spending Money
 Aug. 30 Revising "Backward Art of Spending Money"
 Aug. 31 Finished revision of "Backward Art of Spend'g Money" and gave it to typist
 Sept. 4 Revised typewritten copy of Backward Art

After he married, his detailed records of work are all mixed in with family events—illnesses, the birth of a child and later of grandchildren, departure of a child for school, a dinner guest, schedules of trips to and from our summer home in Vermont, what he had accomplished in his carpentry shop, etc. When someone asked him why he kept a diary he said, "So that I can see each day if I have wasted my time and not do it again!" Some humor in this reply but also some truth.

⁴ La Loma, name of Mrs. Warren Gregory's Berkeley home.

His entry in the little red diary completed, Robin began the real work of the day. Externally—a green eye-shade; an eternally smoking pipe (until the last year); slide rule; index cards of current work in an exquisite, ingenious box of his own making; piles of manuscripts on the enormous desk, closely written and much-corrected sheets in front of him; books to the ceiling, over and under windows; and close at hand, carried each year from winter to summer study and back again in big wooden boxes made by him with handles and reversible address plates, the large record books compiled at the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Internally—an absorption that obliterated the world outside. His concentration was supreme. He never needed protection from sounds, always worked with doors wide open, never even heard a crying child unless he had been told that no other grownup would be around and that he must investigate if a child cried steadily for an hour. Then he would come to—much as one wakes at a definite hour if the hour has been firmly fixed in mind before going to sleep.

His working time was sacred within the family. Even the youngest child knew that "Father was working" and did not interrupt. Yet, at Greensboro where his desk was immediately in front of one of the sliding barn doors that opened up half his study walls, neighborhood and guest children often spoke to him as they passed. Invariably, he stopped and chatted with them. His mother was courteous to children, and so was he. These children, now grown up, remember his friendliness: they never felt they were intruders. Grownups who needed desperately to make some practical remark to him, watched and waited for the invariable break in his work that came about 11:30. Then was when he ate his daily apple, putting the peels into a bronze Chinese bowl or throwing them into the fireplace to be burned along with our package of garbage in the evening fire at Greensboro or Stamford. His own four children and later *their* children trailed after him when they saw him walking back to his study apple in hand. They all learned to take the proffered slice of peeled apple off the point of his big knife.

Robin's desk hours were long. Except on lecture days, he worked again after luncheon until about four. In younger years, he worked evenings, too—less after we were married as both of us considered it a legitimate spree to read aloud several evenings a week if neither

had an imperative writing job to finish. Giving up evening work was one of the few concessions he made to his age in later years.

Robin was a prodigious worker, yes. But he was a player, too. He scheduled his "off" time as methodically as his work time. Does that make him seem rigid? Only in the sense that budgeting one's slender income is rigid. He budgeted his time—it was precious and he did not intend to waste it. Robin enjoyed using his body vigorously. In California years, he spent his summers climbing in the Sierra. In Berkeley he played tennis; the year he taught at Harvard, he played basketball; the year at Oxford, he rode a bicycle to and from his lectures; though not young when he married, he roughhoused with his children with real vigor. Later, at Greensboro, he turned to milder golf. A few months before his death, he cleared a path through our Greensboro woods.

He liked working with his hands—he was a master handyman. This side of him came out particularly at our summer home in Greensboro, Vermont, which is really a comfortable camp. The numerous jobs that always needed doing added to his pleasure in the place. In the thirty-five years after we bought "Huckleberry Rocks" (so named on the oldest maps) on Caspian Lake, Vermont, we spent thirty-three summers or parts of them there. It was our one consecutive home and grew with changes in family needs and in the pattern of living in the farming community around us. We had spots on the hill leveled for our first three little houses; but he and I graded the slopes between houses with shovels and wheelbarrow pushed by our own back muscles. No farmer in that far northern part of Vermont had ever seen a car when we first went there and it was a number of years before we owned one. We walked or paddled to the village two and a half miles away—or more generally just didn't go. Electricity did not reach our end of the lake until twelve summers had passed and it wasn't until the last summer of his life that we had a telephone. Ice for our ice-house was cut from the lake in winter. We pumped water from the lake first by windmill, then by gasoline engine and now by electric engine. But whatever the stage of mechanical conveniences and gadgets, something always needed doing or fixing. Robin was competent alike at pumps and electric refrigerator. But never skilled at driving a car—indeed, he was not only a poor driver, but, curi-

ously enough, an impetuous one. And at Greensboro there were always trees that needed to be chopped down, wood to be sawed, boats to be mended and grass to be cut on a small patch that by courtesy was called our "lawn." Elsewhere, tall grass and wild flowers grew unrestrained—we never had a flower garden. We did have a vegetable garden but Robin consistently refused to share in that work except to give reluctant advice to the struggling children who had taken over. He said he had done enough farm work as a boy to last him through life.

Chopping kindling and laying the fire we needed practically every evening was his regular chore. At first our firewood—slabs of hard maple—was delivered by a team of oxen. Of these slabs Robin built what we called his "Druid fires"—like a little house with floor, back, two side walls and ceiling, open in front with kindling piled inside. They were beautiful beyond all fires I have ever seen on any other hearth. Fires on the Huckleberry Rocks which jut out into the lake were for many years a regular institution. Here Robin was in his element. He built a structure of criss-cross logs which he lighted first. Then, equipped with asbestos gloves, he threw on great boughs of slash he had gathered from evergreen trees he had chopped down. These fires were on solid granite right on the edge of the lake, so he could safely let flames shoot up 15 or 20 feet and sparks three times as high. A picnic supper of hot chocolate, homemade baked beans and sandwiches, a magnificent fire with Robin apparently handling the flames, followed by a long talk around the glowing coals—that was the choicest thing we had to offer our guests or to enjoy just by ourselves.

Our little unlined shacks, with walls of broad horizontal boards, increased as the family grew until finally we had twelve small buildings, six connected with covered brick walls. Each of the six family members had his separate shack, with dining room, boat-house, barn, garage and guesthouse in common. Robin had two houses—really two and a half. For the house that I acquired as my workroom when the children were too old to need it as a play-house, was also our bedroom. Robin's study going up to the raftered roof was, naturally, one of the original group of three. When his work hours were over, it became the family living room. It was here, in front of the fire, that Robin told the children after-supper

stories. These yarns were told serial fashion extending over many months, some of them over years. And here after the children had gone to bed, Robin and I read aloud several nights a week, often joined by our neighbors, the Sprague Coolidges. But Robin was companionable even when reading to himself. He would suddenly burst into his hearty, contagious laugh over an amusing phrase or incident in a book. Then read it to me. To rest his eyes, he nearly always interrupted his reading by a game of solitaire or played out famous chess games from a book.

Scarcely less dear to him than his study was his carpentry shop, a room 18 x 30 feet. Robin was more than a carpenter: he was a cabinetmaker. He loved tools and bought them lavishly. Tools of every sort, hung on brackets he made to fit each one, cover the four walls except where interrupted by my small paint closet and by shelves on which are his supplies of nails, screws, rope and miscellaneous objects, each in a box he made with a sample on the outside. In the middle stands the power machine with buzz saw and planer, and a number of smaller electric machines. Above on the rafters is stored his precious seasoned lumber—butternut, maple, birch, some mahogany and pine. His great sheets of 3- and 5-ply, his long braces, stand behind removable supports. In the years when the children were young, there were five benches in the shop, a big one for Robin and four of diminishing sizes made by him to fit each of the four children. "Shop time with Father" was regularly scheduled. Neighborhood and guest children (of whom there were never fewer than two for the summer and sometimes five) came too. Robin taught them all, from a three-year-old intently sawing in order to produce a precious little heap of sawdust to ten- and eleven-year-olds learning to handle the buzz saw safely. Indeed for a year or two Robin taught shop after school at the City and Country School. It was at this school that a teacher asked her six-year-olds what work their fathers did, and Robin's oldest son, a member of the group, replied, "My father is a carpenter." The amused teacher asked if he didn't teach at the University? The boy still held to his values of work. He answered, "Oh, he goes out there to talk but he's really a carpenter."

After leaving California, the shop was Robin's great outlet. It was far more than exercise—though he belonged to that strenuous

group of people who believe a day has not been adequately lived unless it has produced "a good sweat." Robin was an artist in his shop. The beds, desk, lamps, little boxes he made, met a utilitarian need, to be sure—they comprise most of our Greensboro furniture and much of our Stamford. But every shop piece, no matter how plebeian its use, was designed with utmost care. In the summers of the war years when he commuted from Washington to Greensboro nearly every other week-end, he spent much of his time at home working on the place or in the shop. These quotations from his diary just after he had left Greensboro on war work, show how his mind continued to run on shop creations in the midst of confounding, pressing work:

Aug. 30, 1918: N. Y. on time. Breakfast Grand Central. Home. Saw Mrs. Uzzell. To 3755 Broadway. Found Young. Long talk about Inquiry. He agreed the first task is understanding w. allies about conflict of interests. Took list of documents collected by Inquiry. Lunch w. J. H. Robinson at Faculty Club. Discussed plans for Free School. Home to look over list of documents. Obsessed by plans for a piano lamp at Greensboro. Dined w. Young at Century Club & discussed Inquiry further.

On September 2, in the midst of details of Washington work, this appears:

Wrote to L. Sending design for piano lamp stand.

These are only two of eleven diary entries about the lamp in the next month during which he made two trips from Washington to Vermont.

During his last summer when he was already on a restricted program of exercise, he made a high stepladder so that he could more easily reach the lumber on the overhead rafters. In the evenings, he often drew designs, studying the balance, asking me if this bar were too heavy, this angle or that more pleasing, discarding drawing after drawing until he was satisfied. And he finished the stepladder, sandpapering it to cabinet smoothness, with the same loving care that he did the lamp for the living room. Even the high screened-in shelves for the Guest House pantry—his last carpentry job—was a work of art. In his diary he records how many pieces of wood he had finished each day. That was not merely a poignant

record for himself of his capacity for physical work—though it was that, I am sure. It was also a record of something he loved as a painter loves his painting.

Robin had much of the true artist in him as well as the craftsman. He was sensitive to all the arts except music. He was so nearly tone-deaf that he could not share in the singing with his musical mother or later in family music times with me and the children. He loved paintings. When we were first married, we bought quite a number of Arthur B. Davies' lyric interpretations of California—mountains and seacoast. Robin always cleared a space among his books to hang at least one Davies—than which he could pay no greater compliment. Neither of us was able to follow completely the abstractions to which Davies turned. Davies, whom we knew, gave us a half-way abstraction which he called "Affection" to initiate us into the meaning of abstract art. This small panel always hung (as it still hangs in his last study at Stamford), at the end of one of the bookstacks in Robin's various studies, balanced by a bronze bas-relief of Veblen on the end of another stack.

But it was art in language which interested Robin most of all. In his own writing, he was extremely sensitive to form—the words he used and the way he put them together, as well as the clarity and exactness of content. He worked his manuscripts over and over again—many of the changes were to give a better balance in rhythm and sound. He loved rhythmic prose and every year reread one or more of William Morris' romances, often aloud to get the full beauty of the language.

In Berkeley before we were married the two of us belonged to a "Poetry Circle" which I originally brought together at my house. A group of us met every few weeks in the winter at the homes of the various members. Each hostess cooked supper for the group (hardly anyone had a maid), served wine (cocktails were as yet unknown), and then we settled down around the fire to read poetry. One person each evening was responsible for selecting and reading what he wanted to. Robin loved poetry and read it with intensity but not sentimentality. He had the kind of memory which stored up pages of poetry he liked—William Vaughn Moody, Browning, Shakespeare, Milton's sonnets, a sprinkling of modern poets.

Robin was always a fluent talker among friends. His humor and wit—for he had both—lightened even serious discussions. He was trigger-quick in his replies. Once a friend remarked to him that some famous economist had said that “Mitchell saw a grain of truth in all things erroneous.” Robin roared with laughter and shot back with a twinkle in his eye, “There’s a grain of truth in *that!*” In all the years I listened to his talk, I don’t remember that I was once bored. Silence on his part, sometimes misinterpreted as modesty or even shyness, was as extreme a form of indifference or disapproval as his innate courtesy permitted. But Robin was as good a listener as he was a talker. He was always interested to find out what was going on inside the other fellow and submitted cheerfully to monologues which others found boring or enraging. And he was very skilful in setting people at ease no matter what their background.

Our long walks together began in Berkeley days. Robin and I were both great walkers. His record for a day, I think, was 48 miles—mine was only 29, but I could accomplish 18 to 20 miles a day for weeks running. This we used to do regularly in the high Sierra. Robin was positively exuberant in the mountains. He loved every aspect of the free hard life one leads on the trail with pack horses laden with supplies to last a month—once seven weeks—without replenishing. He never seemed to get tired. He was a grand camper, skilled at packing the kyacks for the pack saddles, a good cook over an open fire. A grand companion, too—gay enough to make others shed their inhibitions, serious enough to extract information from the mountain rangers and shepherders who were the only people we met except, perhaps, another passing pack train. Since we moved practically every day and had to reach a meadow each night for feed for the horses, we became skilled in reading geodetic maps which we mounted in sections on cloth so that they would fold to pocket size. By drainage and flatness, we learned to tell just where we would find a meadow. Moreover, we did not stick to trails all the time if those magic contour lines indicated that we could go a different way.

The summer before we were married, I went into the Sierra for the first time with Robin, the Walter Harts and a friend of theirs, a cook, a packer and a train of 17 horses or mules. The usual plan

for our day was for the men to catch the horses before breakfast, for each person to pack his possessions in his sleeping bag and lug it to the tethered horses, then for the three walkers (Robin, Walter Hart and myself) to start. It was understood that we three should locate the site of our next camp, gather fuel (Robin carried an axe to fell a tree if necessary), build the fire and be ready with superior smiles when the slow riders with pack horses turned up. Each walker carried a rucksack and in one of them was always a book for reading aloud after our luncheon. One day we had to walk further than usual—26 miles if I remember—before we found a tempting camp site. At last we came to an incredible place in that land where the incredible is almost the usual. Under a grove of giant sugar pines, we saw what looked like a burst of sunshine. “A host of golden daffodils”? No—a mile of yellow mountain lilies. We were giddy with excitement, breathless with the beauty of it. But the stream was not near enough for a camp. Walter Hart and I sat down. But Robin disappeared up the hill. There he built a little dam and turned the stream down to our golden stretch of lilies. I came to feel that nothing was impossible—not in the Sierra—not with Robin!

What made Robin such an enchanting companion and enduring friend was his readiness to share—both to give and to take. Here again, I fancy one sees the influence of his boyhood home. Robin shared the family difficulties perhaps too early. But it made him a sharer, or at least it deepened that side of him. Robin enjoyed sharing: he also approved of it intellectually. It was a part of that rare simplicity of his that he never got confused by the exigencies of life but always subordinated secondary things to what he considered primary things—work and human beings. Money was to him distinctly a secondary thing in his life. In his own expenditures, he had two extravagances—books and carpentry tools—to which, perhaps, should be added rather lavish gifts. For the rest he was always open-handed, ready to make loans to his younger brothers to help them through college or get a start in business or to tide over any family emergencies, and particularly to give to his parents in their later years. Of course, his open-handed sharing his income was a minor way in which he entered into the problems of family or friends in trouble. His letters and diary show what an

active part he played in trying to secure positions for Veblen through his difficult years. To Veblen, too, he gave financial help for many years.

Robin wanted a family of his own long before he had one. In many letters he expresses his deep belief that only within a family could the best, the fullest life be lived. Truly satisfying relations between husband and wife must, for him, be based on what in his letters he called "a common load." By this common load he meant far more than sharing responsibilities and decisions for children; indeed, in some ways, he left our children too much to me for their own good, responding to their problems largely when they took the initiative or when a genuine emergency developed. Then he was superb—tender and intelligent, putting aside everything else. A common load to him meant an agreement as to primaries—personal values, social values—and working towards the same ends though not necessarily in the same field of activities and endeavors. Before we were married he writes: "the idea that in marriage an intelligent vigorous woman should surrender all her part in the world's work outside the home is hateful to me." He always lived up to this conception. Work was the breath of life to him. But he respected the work of others as much as his own. He protected my work as far as was possible and when the children were young often relieved me by giving them suppers—sometimes baths. More than that: he gave freely of his own precious time to my work problems, particularly in 1916, -17, -18, when the Bureau of Educational Experiments was in the early stage of planning its research program. These problems, too, held real interest for him. For education is a social science and we were trying to work out scientific methods of observing, recording and interpreting the behavior of young human beings.

He respected honest work wherever he found it, that of others or his own. His readiness to spend time on the manuscripts or problems of others—as countless people testify he did—was an inherent part of his attitude towards honest work and towards people. He accepted people quite simply as they were. He sought and found the best in them and was not sidetracked by their shortcomings. That is why one of his friends and colleagues calls him "the great encourager." Yes, Robin for all his independence was a sharer.

This was not only his respect for honest work. Nor was it only kindness—though he had a heart so tender that he could seldom resist trying to help anyone in trouble. Scores of people have written me, “He was the kindest man I ever knew.” Nor was it, I think, only courtesy—that essential quality of his make-up. A friend writes about him: “His courtesy was a talent and a credo, as rare in its kindness as in its penetration.” It was the warm human quality of a person who gets deep satisfaction in sharing. In the latter part of the biographical letter quoted, he says, “Loving you is as much an expression of my temperament as is my devotion to economic theory.” He could also have said to his many friends, “Sharing with you, your work and your problems and mine, is as much an expression of my temperament as is my devotion to my own work.” Indeed, that is just what he did say, not in words but in action.

In all his human relations, Robin was singularly simple and thoroughly civilized.

IV

We were married on May 8, 1912, in Rev. Joseph Worcester's little Swedenborgian church in San Francisco. Then came seven incredible months abroad. Incredible because we were both foot-loose—a strange experience for both. The past was cut off, for we had both resigned from the University of California. The future was a glowing question mark which worried neither of us. We felt sure we should land on our feet somewhere, both resolved to try to find our next jobs in New York. This suspension between a closed known past and an unknown future released us to play, and both of us had been somewhat starved of play in our very different early years, alike, however, in that each of us had been overloaded with responsibilities.

So we played, with two intervals of work. Three weeks at Taormina in Sicily; across to Italy—new to Robin—making our way mostly by foot or mail auto through the hill towns of the Apennines; and finally reached Berchtesgaden, then the loveliest spot on earth. There we settled down for three weeks of work on his MSS. of *Business Cycles*. His diary shows that he was working largely on Chapters X through XIV. I checked tables with him

and reread all the manuscript with special attention to the language—my usual minor share. In the mornings we worked on an overhanging balcony looking out towards the dramatic Watzmann peaks and in the afternoons went on *Ausflüge*—both work and play recorded in his careful diary. Then came the long walk with rucksacks, with occasional lifts by Auto Post from Berchtesgaden to Innsbruck, going over the glacier and to the top of Gross Glockner on the way. After a little wandering around Germany where each of us had previously spent a year, we settled for three months of work in Garlant's Hotel in London. Here, or in the library of the Royal Statistical Society, Robin worked almost steadily, completing and checking revised manuscript mailed to him from Berkeley. On November 14, he notes: "received first batch of proof."

Robin took time out from work for a few brief trips and more for professional contacts at Oxford and Cambridge, as well as in London. In his diary he mentions talks, usually at luncheon, dinner or tea, with Francis Y. Edgeworth, the Sidney Balls, John Hobson, Arthur Bowley, G. B. Dibblee, Hartley Withers, J. F. Muirhead, J. R. Cahill, William Beveridge, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and the Graham Wallases of whom we saw a good deal. Three meetings we attended stand out vividly: a big, excitedly noisy suffrage meeting where Mrs. Pankhurst spoke; in the House of Commons, where we heard speeches by Asquith, Bonar Law and Balfour; and a meeting at Albert Hall in a London fog so thick that we could see the speakers only dimly. The voices talking about "Poverty" that reached us through the mist were those of Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw. Later, in the winter of 1931-32, when he was Eastman Professor at Balliol, Oxford, he came to know many English economists well. Referring to professional contacts outside of Oxford, he says: "I spent a busy and delightful week with the economists in Cambridge, I saw more or less of old friends in the University of London, I attended the annual meeting of the Association of Teachers of Economics at Reading, and had various other fugitive contacts . . ."

On December 7, 1912, we sailed for home—only we still had to locate a home. Robin and I read proof and checked tables all the way across. In September before we returned from our long

playtime wanderings, Robin had received a letter from W. F. Willcox offering him a position at Cornell. Though, as he wrote his mother, he was definitely looking for an academic connection, he wanted a position in New York for "some very definite plans for economic research which cannot be carried out so well anywhere else." So he declined the offer to go to Cornell; also the offer from Yale in the following spring when we visited the Irving Fishers in New Haven. His diary continues the story:

- April 24, 1913: Promised Irving Fisher that I would give him notice before accepting any other position next year. He talks of research professorship at Yale.
- May 10: Seager of Columbia telephoned to ask whether I would accept place next yr.

The following winter of 1913-14, he gave his course on Types of Economic Theory at Columbia and March 1914 "received notice of my election as Professor of Ecics at Columbia, July 1, 1914 ff." He taught at Columbia, except for the three years at the New School, until 1944 when, at seventy, he retired as Professor Emeritus.

His diary from our arrival in New York in December 1912 to June 1913 has almost daily entries of the last work on the MS. of *Business Cycles*—checking and bringing tables up to date, and seeing it through the press. In June we went to his parents who were living on a plantation in Louisiana. This was the first time I had met them and Robin's two younger brothers who were running the plantation, and the only time I saw Dr. Mitchell who died in January 1915. He was a big, powerful man, with steel blue eyes, reddish grizzled beard and a beak of a nose—still a vigorous personality full of intellectual eagerness though bedridden for many years. In Robin's mother I felt at once the "affectionate wisdom" which Robin ascribes to her.

The rest of the summer we spent camping in the California Sierra. Only once afterwards, did Robin go into the mountains. That was in the summer of 1915. Our oldest boy was then two and our second a nursing baby of nine weeks—two obvious reasons why I remained behind in Berkeley.

His diary of our first months in New York also records my sys-

tematic hunt for living quarters all over the big city which neither of us had known except as a visitor. My wanderings finally took me to the Greenwich Village and Washington Square areas which appealed to us both largely because of back yards, for we were both impatiently waiting for a large family of children. Also, I found there the kind of work I wanted to do. We have had four homes in that part of New York. Though, on lecture days, Robin had to commute to Columbia on the 7th Avenue subway which was not far from any of our homes, he never wanted to move uptown which would have meant less roomy quarters. Our home, wherever it was, had two imperatives to be planned for first, a big study for Robin—which became the family sitting room after his work hours were over—and, after they came, rooms for the four children, with play space on roof or in back yard. The habit, held over from California days, of inviting any out-of-town friend to visit us, made a guest room desirable. We met these family needs by living in roomy but not really large houses (our big Washington Square house was a beautiful but burdensome exception to me) and by my using our bedroom as a workroom, sometimes also as an office for Robin's secretary.

Robin's study housed from 5,000 to 7,000 books according to capacity. He liked to own books he was likely to consult. Of course, they were his working tools. But I think he liked them also as companions, available like friends with a telephone even if not frequently tapped. When we moved, the books (together we had 10,000 at one time) became a source of great anxiety not to say irritation to me. I once asked him if he needed *all* those books. He replied mildly and with a smile, "I *might!*" He arranged his books with careful classification and until the last few years kept an up-to-date catalogue of them which I have. He could lay his hands on any of them immediately and knew the contents of them all in a general way if not in detail. Robin's memory was encyclopedic in range. To the children he was the highest authority. When a dispute over any fact arose, they said "A. F."—which meant, "Ask Father." He frequently made marginal comments in his books and almost automatically corrected typographical errors—sometimes noted the wrong use of a word. Editing was second nature to him.

Most of Robin's friends will remember him in one or another

of his studies in our four homes. Our longest stay was seventeen years in a big apartment with its own entrance at 161 West 12th Street, carved out of the houses bought for the City and Country School. There Robin's study was 40 feet long and 11 feet wide. The long passage with books to the ceiling led to the bright windowed end with his big George Washington desk and large red chair near the fireplace. There Robin worked undisturbed by the children's voices coming up from the school's yard. There, more than in later years, Robin's friends dropped in for talks or for a meal. There the four children grew up and one by one went away to school and college leaving Robin and me alone. We lived for twelve years in our next home—a four-room penthouse on the top of 2 Horatio Street. We made a bedroom into Robin's study with books to the ceiling, over and under windows and stacks at one end. Robin could step out on a terrace to eat his morning apple looking at the Hudson's changing traffic and the sweep of up- and down-town skyscrapers. We both loved that last home we had in New York. It gave us the sense of extension both of us had missed ever since we left California.

When the children were little a place for regular outings away from the city seemed imperative. In winters, it was on these outings that the children and Robin saw most of one another. Our first week-end place was a ridiculous little shack at Long Beach, perched on stilts and covered with tar paper, a mile's walk after the bus and boardwalk stopped. The six Mitchells, usually with two or three extra children and an occasional hardy grownup, began our long weekly treks down that glorious beach when two babies had to be carried in addition to countless milk bottles plus all food. We packed sardine-wise into the small living room and three closet-like bedrooms. We went right through the winter when the water froze overnight on the wood stove and we slept in sleeping bags. Everyone, perforce, had to keep active at chores both to keep warm and to keep food moving steadily. There was plenty of time for play, however, in which Robin joined as vigorously as the children—roughhousing on the beach, running after a child learning to ride a bicycle, helping the children to build an igloo in winter and, in spring or fall, a double-paddled canoe for the safe water of the narrow bay behind us. Our week-ends in that remark-

able little shack came to an end when a company "improved" the place—boardwalk and all.

The children were old enough by then for us to dream that some of them might eventually want homes of their own near New York. With this in mind, in 1924, we bought our lovely 70 acre farm (which is largely woodland) at Stamford, Connecticut, running down to the Mianus River. At first, after removing the chickens from the bedrooms, we fixed the old farmhouse for two families—ourselves and Mr. and Mrs. Casey who took over the farm part. Then, ten years ago, we built our present one-story house for weekends and vacations. This house was our home for the last two years of Robin's life. We moved there first to make room in the penthouse for our youngest son and his family in the days of acute housing shortage. We managed to house Robin's work library at Stamford by adding a small extension and bringing out bookcases including stacks from Horatio Street. From butternut brought from Greensboro, he made the mantel and the frame for the portrait of himself with one-year-old Sprague in his arms which still hangs over it. This move proved a fortunate one. For the following summer, Robin unexpectedly had his first heart attack.

By this time our children were widely scattered. Only Sprague, who had married Marion Roberts, and now commutes daily to his work with the Condé Nast Publishers, lived nearby with his twin daughters. Our oldest son, John, who had married Barbara Jarzembowska and has three sons, was an economist at Tulane University, New Orleans, now in France on a Fulbright research fellowship. Marni, our only daughter, was teaching riding in Colorado and now lives in Kansas City; Arnold, our youngest, who had married Jean Wilding and has two daughters, is now with the Stanford Research Institute at Palo Alto, California. Thus we had seven grandchildren when Robin died. The eighth arrived a month after his death.

Robin loved his Stamford study. He loved the wide view from our great window in the "big room" to which we had brought our Davies paintings. He loved his daily afternoon walks through our woods to the Mianus, particularly when his twin granddaughters were big enough to go with him. Working conditions were perfect for him—few interruptions even by telephone. We spent one night

a week in New York at my old office at 69 Bank Street, fixed up as a small apartment. This arrangement gave him a day or two each week at the National Bureau and a chance to lunch with the research staff.

Robin and I both enjoyed the extremely simple menage at Stamford which I could manage with only occasional help. During the war years, I, like most women, did all the cooking and housework, though carrying a full-time teaching job, and I just kept it up afterwards. Robin made one contribution to housekeeping chores. He helped to wash lunch and dinner dishes—breakfast messes for some inscrutable reason were still considered my exclusive work. After both of us had resigned from active work—I mean work other than writing—we lived the simplest kind of life, alone most of the time both at Stamford and at Greensboro. It was a time of great contentment.

I think back to the friends Robin most valued who came frequently to the house in the early days in New York. The three I think of first, all went back to his days in Chicago—all were older than he. Among them all, Thorstein Veblen stands out. Robin's great admiration for Veblen's brilliance, imagination, artistry and erudition dated from the time he studied under Veblen at the University of Chicago. In his original letter to J. M. Clark (written in 1928), Robin made this remark, afterwards deleting it when he amended the letter for publication: "Compared with other economists at Chicago, he (Veblen) was a giant." Yet in that same letter he says that Veblen "got nothing more certain" than the classical economists "by his dazzling performances with another set of premises." I think Veblen was a tremendous stimulus to Robin's own thinking rather than a leader whom Robin followed. He shows, I think, how early he felt his own divergence from Veblen in a letter of June 19, 1910, in which he was justifying narrowing his work within the money economy to business cycles.

There is nothing new to write about my work, except perhaps to point out that the present book, which has applied to the court to have its name changed to *Business Cycles*, is part and parcel of the *Money Economy*. Whether the whole of the latter will get itself finished this year I am not sure. But I am far more anxious to do thoroly the parts which I do pretend to cover than to get over the whole field by any

specified time. Has it not really been one of the great sources of weakness in economics that people have been content with plausible speculations, attractively presented, instead of insisting upon putting their ideas to the final test of correspondence with facts as they are known and working out modifications or realigning the whole discussion when the speculations and the facts seem out of balance? Is it not really better to establish firmly a few simple propositions than to elaborate many in the speculative manner? Do not the real sciences proceed in the more humble manner? Can't you agreed that even Veblen's constructive work would have been in closer harmony with his critique of economic method if he were more patient in accumulating and presenting his evidence? The more I read of the recent theorizing upon crises the more am I convinced that statistical measurement of the various factors involved is the thing needed to substitute certainty for plausibility. For us, it is what experimentation is for Loeb. Is this really heresy?

As a friend, Robin valued Veblen highly and immensely enjoyed his humor and "play with ideas." His diary and letters show how active a part Robin took in getting this complicated genius into professional positions both in California years and later in New York. When, in 1918, the revamped *Dial* wanted Veblen on its New York staff, Robin took a large share in persuading him to accept. While Veblen lived in New York, he came often to our house. I think ours was one of the few homes where he felt thoroughly at ease. Veblen was helpless in getting himself around the city and was usually brought and called for by some admirer. But once there, he relaxed. Veblen, the silent, the shy, talked freely with Robin not minding me silently sewing on the sofa. He even came to Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners sometimes. He enjoyed the outgoing informality of our children even to having a youngster climb up on his lap. That is my most vivid image of Veblen—slouched down in Robin's big red chair in the 12th Street study, talking to children—an image I fancy that few people share with me.

Another long friendship was with John Dewey, the other teacher at Chicago who had great influence on Robin's early thinking—an influence Robin said "from which Laughlin wanted to guard us."⁵ It seems significant that the only paper dating from

⁵ Notes for "Informal talk" at University of Chicago, March 1925.

his days as a graduate student at the University of Chicago that Robin preserved is a sheaf of handwritten notes of a discussion of "Austrian Theory of Value: Remarks made before the Philosophical Club, November 19, 1896." The notes close with John Dewey's remarks. In the early years in New York we saw much of both Mr. and Mrs. Dewey whom I, too, had known since my own early Chicago days. Alice Dewey took me under her impressive wing when we first came as strangers to New York. In later years we saw less of John Dewey, particularly after Alice Dewey died. It was with the Deweys and Dr. Dorothea Moore, Robin's great friend from California, that we saw the first exhibition of radically modern pictures to be shown in New York and sat up most of the night afterwards discussing them. In letters to me in March 1914, Robin refers to Mr. Dewey's lecture notes which he is reading at Mr. Dewey's request. Robin's diary records his reading of each of Dewey's books as they came out—books which have many marginal notes in Robin's handwriting. When we moved his books to restricted space at Stamford, two years before he died, Robin gave most of his books on psychology to the Bureau of Educational Experiments. But he took all of Dewey with him saying he hoped to read him again some day.

The Jacques Loeb's were old friends of both Robin's and mine before we were married—Robin's friendship going back to Chicago years. Loeb had gone from the University of California to the Rockefeller Institute before we arrived in New York. Robin had enormous respect for Loeb as a scientist and used the many evenings we and the Loeb's spent together to draw him out on his own subject. On April 11, 1922, Robin's diary notes: "The Jacques Loeb's dined with us. Loeb in grand form. Urging me to establish a journal for quantitative work." Loeb loved, nevertheless, to theorize wildly about everything under the sun and did so with engaging confidence. Jacques Loeb was a most lovable person.

Hardly a day passed that someone did not come to talk with Robin at home, often staying for luncheon. His diary tells of visits in New York from many old California friends, both personal and professional. But we went out and entertained comparatively seldom except in the first years. Since automobiles have made Greensboro relatively accessible, many of Robin's friends have dropped

in on us there. Sometimes they stayed only for a dip in the lake and a talk with Robin. If they stayed for several days, Robin kept to his regular schedule of work.

V

In addition to the letter of October 1911 already quoted, Robin has given an inside point of view of his own professional development in a letter written in 1928 to John Maurice Clark at his request. Though this second letter about himself has been twice printed, it is here given again since it rounds out his own analysis of his development. I have heard various people say that in this letter Robin was "rationalizing," as he himself suggests. Yet the early stages of intellectual and social development he describes in 1928 are fundamentally the same as those he describes in 1911. Was he already rationalizing in 1911 when his memories of those early stages were comparatively fresh? I am inclined to doubt it. I think his diary and letters before 1928 bear out his own analysis of the main stages of his development.

This letter of 1928 was not originally written for publication. Among his papers is his original letter with his handwritten revisions, made a year later when he rather reluctantly gave Maurice Clark permission to publish it. In a letter to Professor Stúart A. Rice, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, February 12, 1929, he explains these changes:

The emendations consist in dropping out a few expressions which would give needless pain or offense to others, particular phrases implying invidious comparisons.

Yet the emendations are few—most of them to make the language less colloquial. The letter which follows is as he revised it for publication, with two exceptions: in one footnote is an original phrase which he deleted, since his reason for deleting it no longer holds; and the two paragraphs omitted by Clark are included.

Huckleberry Rocks, Greensboro, Vermont
August 9, 1928

Dear Maurice:

I know no reason why you should hesitate to dissect a colleague for the instruction, or amusement, of mankind. Your interest in ideas

rather than in personalities will be clear to any intelligent reader. Nor is the admiration I feel for your skill as an analyst likely to grow less warm if you take me apart to see how I work. Indeed, I should like to know myself!

Whether I can really help you is doubtful. The questions you put are questions I must answer from rather hazy recollections of what went on inside me thirty and forty and more years ago. Doubtless my present impressions of how I grew up are largely rationalizations. But perhaps you can make something out of the type of rationalizations in which I indulge.

Concerning the inclination you note to prefer concrete problems and methods to abstract ones, my hypothesis is that it got started, perhaps manifested itself would be more accurate, in childish theological discussions with my grandaunt. She was the best of Baptists, and knew exactly how the Lord had planned the world. God is love; he planned salvation; he ordained immersion; his immutable word left no doubt about the inevitable fate of those who did not walk in the path he had marked. Hell is no stain upon his honor, no inconsistency with love . . . I adored the logic and thought my grandaunt flinched unworthily when she expressed hopes that some backstairs method might be found of saving from everlasting flame the ninety and nine who are not properly baptized. But I also read the Bible and began to cherish private opinions about the character of the potentate in Heaven. Also I observed that his followers on earth did not seem to get what was promised them here and now. I developed an impish delight in dressing up logical difficulties which my grandaunt could not dispose of. She always slipped back into the logical scheme, and blinked the facts in which I came to take a proprietary interest.

I suppose there is nothing better as a teething ring for a child who likes logic than the garden variety of Christian theology. I cut my eye-teeth on it with gusto and had not entirely lost interest in that exercise when I went to college.

There I began studying philosophy and economics about the same time. The similarity of the two disciplines struck me at once. I found no difficulty in grasping the differences between the great philosophical systems as they were presented by our textbooks and our teachers. Economic theory was easier still. Indeed, I thought the successive systems of economics were rather crude affairs compared with the subtleties of the metaphysicians. Having run the gamut from Plato to T. H. Green (as undergraduates do) I felt the gamut from Quesnay to Marshall was a minor theme. The technical part of the theory was easy. Give me premises and I could spin speculations by the yard. Also I knew that my "deductions" were futile. It

seemed to me that people who took seriously the sort of articles which were then appearing in the *Q. J. E.* might have a better time if they went in for metaphysics proper.

Meanwhile I was finding something really interesting in philosophy and in economics. John Dewey was giving courses under all sorts of titles and every one of them dealt with the same problem—how we think. I was fascinated by his view of the place which logic holds in human behavior. It explained the economic theorists. The thing to do was to find out how they came to attack certain problems; why they took certain premises as a matter of course; why they did not consider all the permutations and variants of those problems which were logically possible; why their contemporaries thought their conclusions were significant. And, if one wanted to try his own hand at constructive theorizing, Dewey's notion pointed the way. It is a misconception to suppose that consumers guide their course by ratiocination—they don't think except under stress. There is no way of deducing from certain principles what they will do, just because their behavior is not itself rational. One has to find out what they do. That is a matter of observation, which the economic theorists had taken all too lightly. Economic theory became a fascinating subject—the orthodox types particularly—when one began to take the mental operations of the theorists as the problem, instead of taking their theories seriously.

Of course Veblen fitted perfectly into this set of notions. What drew me to him was his artistic side. I had a weakness for paradoxes—Hell set up by the God of Love. But Veblen was a master developing beautiful subtleties, while I was a tyro emphasizing the obvious. He did have such a good time with the theory of the leisure class and then with the preconceptions of economic theory! And the economists reacted with such bewildered soberness! There was a man who really could play with ideas! If one wanted to indulge in the game of spinning theories who could match his skill and humor? But if anything were needed to convince me that the standard procedure of orthodox economics could meet no scientific tests, it was that Veblen got nothing more certain by his dazzling performances with another set of premises.* His working conceptions of human nature might be a vast improvement; he might have uncanny insights; but he could do no more than make certain conclusions plausible—like the rest. How important were the factors he dealt with and the factors he scamped was never established.

That was a sort of problem which was beginning to concern me. William Hill set me a course paper on "Wool Growing and the Tariff." I read a lot of the tariff speeches and got a new side light

* Compared with other economists at Chicago, he was a giant.

on the uses to which economic theory is adapted, and the ease with which it is brushed aside on occasion. Also I wanted to find out what really had happened to wool growers as a result of protection. The obvious thing to do was to collect and analyze the statistical data. If at the end I had demonstrated no clear-cut conclusion, I at least knew how superficial were the notions of the gentlemen who merely debated the tariff issue, whether in Congress or in academic quarters. That was my first "investigation"—I did it in the way which seemed obvious, following up the available materials as far as I could, and reporting what I found to be the "facts." It's not easy to see how any student assigned this topic could do much with it in any other way.

A brief introduction to English economic history by A. C. Miller, and unsystematic readings in anthropology instigated by Veblen reinforced the impressions I was getting from other sources. Everything Dewey was saying about how we think, and when we think, made these fresh materials significant. Men had always deluded themselves, it appeared, with strictly logical accounts of the world and their own origin; they had always fabricated theories for their spiritual comfort and practical guidance which ran far beyond the realm of fact without straining their powers of belief. My grand-aunt's theology; Plato and Quesnay; Kant, Ricardo and Karl Marx; Cairnes and Jevons, even Marshall were much of a piece. Each system was tolerably self-consistent—as if that were a test of "truth"! There were realms in which speculation on the basis of assumed premises achieved real wonders; but they were realms in which one began frankly by cutting loose from the phenomena we can observe. And the results were enormously useful. But that way of thinking seemed to get good results only with reference to the simplest of problems, such as numbers and spatial relations. Yet men practiced this type of thinking with reference to all types of problems which could not be treated readily on a matter-of-fact basis—creation, God, "just" prices in the middle ages, the Wealth of Nations in Adam Smith's time, the distribution of incomes in Ricardo's generation, the theory of equilibrium in my own day.

There seemed to be one way of making real progress, slow, very slow, but tolerably sure. That was the way of natural science. I really knew nothing of science and had enormous respect for its achievements. Not the Darwinian type of speculation which was then so much in the ascendant—that was another piece of theology. But chemistry and physics. They had been built up not in grand systems like soap bubbles; but by the patient processes of observation and testing—always critical testing—of the relations between the working hypotheses and the processes observed. There was plenty of need for rigorous thinking, indeed of thinking more precise than Ricardo achieved; but

the place for it was *inside* the investigation, so to speak—the place that mathematics occupied in physics as an indispensable tool. The problems one could really do something with in economics were problems in which speculation could be controlled.

That's the best account I can give offhand of my predilection for the concrete. Of course, it seems to me rather a predilection for problems one can treat with some approach to scientific method. The abstract is to be made use of at every turn, as a handmaiden to help hew the wood and draw the water. I loved romances—particularly William Morris' tales of lands that never were—and utopias, and economic systems, of which your father's, when I came to know it, seemed the most beautiful; but these were objects of art, and I was a workman who wanted to become a scientific worker, who might enjoy the visions which we see in mountain mists but who trusted only what we see in the light of common day.

Besides the spice of rationalizing which doubtless vitiates my recollections—uncontrolled recollections at that—this account worries me by the time it is taking, yours as well as mine. I'll try to answer the other questions concisely.

Business cycles turned up as a problem in the course of the studies which I began with Laughlin. My first book on the greenbacks dealt only with the years of rapid depreciation and spasmodic wartime reaction. I knew that I had not gotten to the bottom of the problems and wanted to go on. So I compiled that frightful second book as an apparatus for a more thorough analysis. By the time it was finished I had learned to see the problems in a larger way. Veblen's paper on "Industrial and Pecuniary Employments" had a good deal to do with opening my eyes. Presently I found myself working on the system of prices and its place in modern economic life. Then I got hold of Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes*—a fascinating book. But Simmel, no more than Veblen, knew the relative importance of the factors he was working with. My manuscript grew—it lies unpublished to this day. As it grew in size it became more speculative. I was working away from any solid foundation—having a good time, but sliding gaily over abysses I had not explored. One of the most formidable was the recurring readjustments of prices, which economists treated apart from their general theories of value, under the caption "Crises." I had to look into the problem: It proved to be susceptible of attack by methods which I thought reliable. The result was the big California monograph. I thought of it as an introduction to economic theory.

This conception is responsible for the chapter on "Modern Economic Organization." I don't remember precisely at what stage the need of such a discussion dawned upon me. But I have to do every-

thing a dozen times. Doubtless I wrote parts of that chapter fairly early and other parts late as I found omissions in the light of the chapters on "The Rhythm of Business Activity." Of course, I put nothing in which did not seem to me strictly pertinent to the understanding of the processes with which the volume dealt. That I did not cover the field very intelligently, even from my own viewpoint, appears from a comparison of the books published in 1913 and 1927. Doubtless before I am done with my current volume, I shall be passing a similar verdict upon the chapter as I left it last year.

As to the relation between my analytic description and "causal" theory I have no clear ideas—though I might develop some at need. To me it seems that I try to follow through the interlacing processes involved in business expansion and contraction by the aid of everything I know, checking my speculations just as far as I can by the data of observation. Among the things I "know" are the way in which economic activity is organized in business enterprises, and the way these enterprises are conducted for money profits. But that is not a simple matter which enables me to deduce certain results—or rather, to deduce results with certainty. There is much in the workings of business technique which I should never think of if I were not always turning back to observation. And I should not trust even my reasoning about what businessmen will do if I could not check it up. Some unverifiable suggestions do emerge; but I hope it is always clear that they are unverified. Very likely what I try to do is merely carrying out the requirements of John Stuart Mill's "complete method." But there is a great deal more passing back and forth between hypotheses and observation, each modifying and enriching the other, than I seem to remember in Mill's version. Perhaps I do him injustice as a logician through default of memory; but I don't think I do classical economics injustice when I say that it erred sadly in trying to think out a deductive scheme and then talked of verifying *that*. Until a science has gotten to the stage of elaborating the details of an established body of theory—say finding a planet from the aberrations of orbits, or filling a gap in the table of elements—it is rash to suppose one can get an hypothesis which stands much chance of holding good except from a process of attempted verification, modification, fresh observation, and so on. (Of course, there is a good deal of commerce between most economic theorizing and personal observation of an irregular sort—that is what has given our theories their considerable measure of significance. But I must not go off into that issue.)*

Finally, about the table of deciles. One cannot be sure that a given

* The two following paragraphs were omitted in the previously published versions of this letter.

point on the decile curve represents the relative price of just one commodity or the relative wage of just one industry. For it often happens, particularly near the center of the range covered, that several commodities and industries have identical relatives in a certain year and these identical relatives may happen to be decile points. But I think the criticisms you make of my interpretations of the movements of the deciles are valid. Frederick C. Mills makes similar strictures in his *Behavior of Prices*, p. 279 ff., particularly p. 283 note. The fact is that when writing the first book about business cycles I seem to have had no clear ideas about secular trends. The term does not occur in the index. Seasonal variations appear to be mentioned only in connection with interest rates. Of course certain rough notions along these lines may be inferred; but not such definite ideas as would safeguard me against the errors you pointed out. What makes matters worse for me, I was behind the times in this respect. J. P. Norton's *Statistical Studies in the New York Money Market* had come out in 1902. Norton did a better job in the statistical analysis of time series than Warren Persons accomplished in 1919. I ought to have known and made use of his work.

That is only one of several serious blemishes upon the statistical work in my 1913 volume. After Hourwich left Chicago, and that was before I got deep into economics, no courses were given on statistics in my time. I was blissfully ignorant of everything except the simplest devices. To this day I have remained an awkward amateur, always ready to invent some crude scheme for looking into anything I want to know about, and quite likely to be betrayed by my own apparatus. I shall die in the same sad state.

I did not intend to inflict such a screed upon you when I started. Now that I have read it over, I feel compunctions about sending it. Also some hesitations. I don't like the intellectual arrogance which I developed as a boy, which stuck by me in college, and which I shall never get rid of wholly. My only defense is that I was made on a certain pattern and had to do the best I could—like everybody else. Doubtless I am at bottom as simple a theologian as my grandaunt. The difference is that I have made my view of the world out of the materials which were available in the 1880's and '90's, whereas she built, with less competent help than I had, out of the materials available in the farming communities of the 1840's and '50's. Perhaps you have been able to develop an outlook on the world which gives you a juster view than I had of the generations which preceded me and of the generation to which I belong. If I did not think so, I should not be sending you a statement so readily misunderstood.

Ever yours,
Wesley C. Mitchell

VI

Details of Robin's professional career—the chronological sequence of his academic appointments, the honorary degrees from universities and the medals from organizations which he received—are told by other contributors to this book. Other contributors, too, suggest something of his activities and work other than his teaching, his research, and his writings. His unpublished papers show clearly how much time and thought he spent on co-operative undertakings. He believed firmly in a co-operative attack on social problems, in a sharing of findings among workers who were studying human behavior in various fields. That was why he spent so much time on the Social Science Research Council. He believed also in spreading to lay folk the conception of a scientific approach to social problems. That is why he talked to such a wide variety of lay audiences, particularly in his early New York years. Here, these beliefs and their consequent activities, though an inherent part of the man, can be mentioned only in passing.

Before or at the beginning of the first World War, he was already taking an active share in planning two big ventures—perhaps they might be called “adventures,” for they were both experimental. On April 25, 1939, at the “Anniversary Dinner to celebrate the 20th year of the New School for Social Research,” Robin described how his connection with the school began. It was in 1918 in Washington when he was a member of a staff “to serve the War Boards in their task of economic mobilization.” The staff, he said, had wired for Alvin Johnson as “the best of all possible men” to make a monthly summary of statistics for them.

... He (Alvin Johnson) had breakfast with me one hot July morning in the Cosmos Club. I told him about the monthly summary of statistics. He told me about a new project called the ‘Free School of Political Science.’ I urged him to take charge of the monthly summary as a patriotic duty. He urged me to take part in the ‘Free School’ as a civic duty. He accepted. I accepted. Neither of us seemed sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought on that occasion. It was like settling moral issues on the spot with a six shooter, after the best traditions of the old West, in which both of us had been dipped. . . .

His diary entry on September 30, 1918 refers to a “talk with

Seligman about leaving Columbia for the New School of Social Sciences" (another early name for the school), and a "talk w. J. H. Robinson about plans of the new school." Robin, still involved in war work when the New School opened in February 1919, did not begin his lectures there until the following fall. Many diary entries during the preliminary planning time and during the years he taught there, show both his deep interest and his characteristic willingness to take on practical jobs to make a success of any venture in which he believed. Among his papers are handwritten first drafts of early reports and bulletins issued by the New School, and also an article he wrote about the school, printed on April 8, 1920, in Edwin Gay's *Evening Post*. These papers show why he joined James Harvey Robinson, Charles Beard and Alvin Johnson as one of the "founders" of the New School; they also show his fundamental social thesis in an educational setup—that sound social reorganization must rest on established knowledge. Robin's joining the New School experiment was a part of his lifelong protest against restricting freedom of speech in academic institutions. It was a part of his interest in experimentation in education and in methods of teaching less rigidly set up than in orthodox centers of education. (This interest in experimental education was very precious to me personally. It gave him a direct, not merely a vicarious interest in my work which he supported, not only through counsel, but actively as a member of committees and secretary and treasurer for some years, and as trustee for the Bureau of Educational Experiments from its organization in 1916 to his death in 1948. He was also for many years a trustee of the Little Red School House, an experimental school.) He left the New School because he felt the graduate students he taught at Columbia had more background and were more likely to make their own constructive use of the point of view behind his teaching. He never lost interest or faith in the New School, however, and shared in the planning of new developments until his death.

The second venture which in 1917 he actively shared in planning was, of course, the National Bureau of Economic Research. Robin came to New York, as shown by the quotation from his letter of November 6, 1911, because he felt the need of colleagues

in the research he was determined to do. I think when he resigned from the University of California he already had the half-formulated plan, or at least the dream, that he could become active in getting an organization for economic research started which would also be the center of his own research. Though I find no letter from him making such a statement, perhaps this idea began to germinate when Edwin Gay asked him to initiate a new type of work at Harvard. In a letter of May 9, 1909, Robin wrote:

Gay's proposal was that I should take charge of organizing a really good statistical laboratory, for the use both of the department of economics and the graduate school of business administration. He thinks there is nothing of the sort in the country at present deserving to be called first-rate, and that the opportunity for a constructive piece of work is good.

In any case, I cannot remember the time when Robin did not talk about an organization for economic research. It was in 1917 that he joined Malcolm Rorty, Edwin F. Gay and N. I. Stone to form a committee which, after a three-year interruption by the war, finally launched the National Bureau of Economic Research in 1920. From that time on, the National Bureau was the focus of his intellectual interest, the emotional center of his own work, and the work responsibility that lay closest to his inner life. He was Director of Research until he resigned in 1945 in order to concentrate completely on research on business cycles which now involved not only himself but many of the research staff of the National Bureau. What he accomplished, both as Director of Research and as a member of the research staff, I leave for his colleagues to tell. I think the points the research staff chose to stress in writing me after his death would have pleased him deeply. The search for the truth and the atmosphere of joint effort, subordination of the personal in research contributions, were of the essence of his conception of a research organization.

November 3, 1948

Dear Mrs. Mitchell:

At a meeting of the research staff held Monday, November 1, I was instructed by the staff to send you the following message:

Today is our first meeting without Wesley Mitchell. All our thoughts center on him, and we think also of his courageous

wife and children. We all loved Wesley Mitchell. He was the founder of our group; our teacher, friend and guide. He taught us to recognize the truth, to cherish it and pursue it. He taught us to work together and help one another. What we have accomplished in the past, and what we may accomplish in the future, we owe to his leadership, teaching and encouragement over the years.

With kindest regards,

Faithfully yours,
Arthur F. Burns

VII

Have I succeeded in giving his professional colleagues some impression of what manner of man my husband, Wesley Clair Mitchell was? Have I distorted the picture so that it gives the impression that he was a saint? He was no saint. He was intensely human, full of little human foibles, but never petty. He had the flaws of his virtues. His tenderness of heart, surely a virtue, sometimes—not often—clouded his judgment of the worth of a person's work. He was always considerate when he realized there was anything to be considerate about. But his concentration—another virtue—was so complete that he was sometimes simply unaware of the people around him. His occasional unawareness of what was happening even in serious matters inside the people he loved was due, in a large measure, I think, to his complete normality, his sanity, his basic simplicity. I never knew him to be sorry for himself.

One of his qualities was an impressive control of himself which was *not* entirely an avoidance of irritating situations as he suggests in his letter of 1911. Once when he had atropine in his eyes, he spent his work hours sitting in his big chair in his study thinking consecutively. At the end of three days, he wrote rapidly what he had thought out. He showed another kind of control when the hurricane struck our Greensboro place in 1938. He happened to be alone—I was in India and the children at summer work or play. First, he went to the house of our neighbors, the Sprague Coolidges, who were also away, to make sure that their nine-year-old daughter and the friend who was with her were all right. The trees were crashing on all sides—189 came down during the blow. He knew he could do nothing until the storm was over. Anyway, all lights

were out. He told me he realized that the following day would be hard work. So he decided to get a good night's sleep in preparation. And he did! In the morning, when he woke, the trees had fallen so close to his sleeping house and everywhere else that it took him hours to climb out and make the rounds.

One more incident of his control—again at Greensboro—may seem incredible to those who did not know him: but to his close friends, I think it will seem characteristic. He was never a good swimmer; he learned to swim after we went to Greensboro. Once he nearly drowned. We were at a water-sports party at the Clive Days' with scores of excited children and adolescents along with their parents. I had gone in early as I was then carrying a child. He got out over his depth. He went down twice. Then he managed to get his hands on the edge of a canoe. A young girl, as a joke, pulled his hands off. He went down for the third time. Mrs. Day, a strong swimmer, saw it happen. She dived. She told me afterwards that she found him on the bottom of the lake. He clutched her with both hands—she couldn't move. Then she felt his hands gradually relax—let go. She kicked him violently to the surface where Ernest Hocking caught him. Afterwards I asked him what really happened. He said that he thought he was drowning and suddenly realized that Mrs. Day would drown, too, if he didn't let go. So—he just let go.

His wonderful health made it difficult for him to understand sickness in others. The heart which was definitely injured at fourteen when he had rheumatic fever, did not catch up with him for fifty-nine years. A sprained ankle, occasional laryngitis, his tonsils out—that is the list of his illnesses during our marriage. When he had a cold, he had the naive idea that *his* cold couldn't be contagious. He had the equally naive idea that a person was either dying or completely well. So when the doctor put him to bed at Stamford in late September 1948, and told him to try to put work and work worries out of his mind for the present, it was a profound shock which no experience had geared him to take. That same day he asked me to telephone Arthur Burns at the National Bureau that his salary stop as of that date. When I suggested that he could well count this time as sick leave as a week had not yet passed since he had been working on his manuscript, he said, "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.”

Through his brief illness, he never ceased to be his courteous self to nurses and family. He was just himself, even in dreams. His dreams, which were cast in the form of his work show how deep and how genuine were his scientific and social interests and beliefs. He told me one morning, “I dreamed of the sweetest records any economist could imagine.” He had found a set of records of family incomes in Athens which not only gave total figures but just how each member earned his share—where a girl had worked, her hours, what she earned and what proportion she contributed to the family. But that was not what lifted these records into their unique position. The records went back to barter time. But, more than that, the people of Athens had kept barter going continuously along with money exchange. The records showed, along with money prices, just what a bushel of wheat or a cow could be exchanged for. “You see,” he said, “along with all the fluctuations in the value of gold and silver, we had a constant measure in terms of basic commodities.” His smile was wistful and humorous as he said, “Too bad it was a dream. They were the sweetest records anyone could wish for.”

An earlier dream he told me at Greensboro, was one he could not shake off—he dreamed it several times. First, he was in a New England church (we had recently been to a local wedding at the local church). Gradually the church changed to a mediaeval cathedral in the building. It was a great communal undertaking—everyone was to do something towards the building of it. Everyone was enthusiastic, uplifted. He was given the task of assigning who should do what. He soon discovered that everyone wanted to be assigned a square inch of the Christ child or the Madonna. This depressed him. No one was thinking of the cathedral as a whole—only the glory of his own part in it. Still, he began drawing up a table of pieces of work on the cathedral using a square inch of the Christ child or Madonna as the unit. Then the contractors entered into the picture. He found they were selling work on the coveted square inches at a profit to themselves. Now it became his job to control the contractors as well as to get over to the people the

concept that contributing to any part of the cathedral was worthy. But the people did not respond. He awoke each time with a sense that this great communal effort had degenerated into a selfish clamor for personal glory. Was that his allegory for the struggle for one world? Or did it depict his troubling experience that many people have difficulties in working as a group, eyes on the whole work, not on their own little share?

Robin never showed the qualities that made him what he was more clearly than during his illness. It was like him, the last summer, to show that he accepted that his work life was nearing an end only by working the harder—and by his dreams. As a freshman in college when he was told that he could not live more than a year, and again when he thought he was drowning, he had faced death with steadiness and generosity. Again, he faced the reality of death with the same rare simplicity with which he had faced the realities of life.