



Ross McDonald Parish

24 December 1929—5 October 2001

Geoff Hogbin

Ross Parish specialised in agricultural economics, but he also made valuable contributions to many other areas such as trade, the environment and education.

The untimely death of Ross Parish in October after a series of chronic, debilitating illnesses ended his long and valuable association with The Centre of Independent Studies. He was one of the longest-serving members of CIS's Council of Academic Advisors and, for many years, honorary Research Director. The encouragement and advice he offered CIS founder and Executive Director, Greg Lindsay, and his very generous donations of time and effort to CIS activities, especially publishing, played a substantial part in its successful establishment, growth and development. In recognition of his contribution to CIS he was made an inaugural Distinguished Fellow in 1996.

A child of the Great Depression, Ross's early years were spent on his father's dairy farm at Dondingalong (near Kempsey) in northern New South Wales. He was regarded as a bright pupil at the local one-teacher primary school and later at Murwillumbah High School. Encouraged by his parents (his father was an old-fashioned socialist who saw education as a way out of the drudgery and financial hardship of dairy farming) he enrolled at the University of Sydney in 1946 to study in the Faculty of Agriculture, supported by a New South Wales Department of Agriculture traineeship.

Ross's university life reflected the breadth of his interests. He became actively interested in the Freethought Society, which centred on the charismatic and controversial philosophy professor, John Anderson. This society was committed to applying the principles of what Anderson called 'realist philosophy' to rigorous inquiry into general philosophical issues and social

phenomena, including politics, literature and religion. Always interested in individual freedom and the relationship of the individual and the state, Ross's involvement in the society developed his thinking on these and many other social and ethical issues. During the Korean hostilities he and some of his friends sowed the seeds of a rift in the Freethought Society by forming the Anti-Conscription Committee. Although opposed to conscription, Anderson thought the issue unimportant and Ross's involvement in the committee was early evidence of the independent thinking and courage to take strong public stands on important issues that characterised his life. Unusually for a student of agriculture, many of his university friends were Arts students he met through the Freethought Society. These included David Stove, Peter Coleman and David Armstrong, all of whom later became leaders in the intellectual life of Australia. His time at university was also used to cultivate his lifelong interest in music of many kinds, art and literature.

Because of the economic hardships experienced by his parents and other dairy farmers in the Great Depression, Ross specialised in agricultural economics. This was taught by K.O. Campbell, a founding father of the discipline in Australia. After graduating in 1951, he joined the Department of Agriculture as an agricultural economist. Encouraged by Campbell, he

Geoff Hogbin, an economist, is a former Monash colleague and longtime friend of Parish. The help of Ray Evans, Alwyn Karpin, Greg Lindsay, Warren Musgrave, Leon Parish and Roley Piggott in the preparation of this obituary is acknowledged with gratitude.

went to the University of Chicago in 1956 to study for his PhD, supported initially by a Fulbright Travel Grant and a University of Chicago Fellowship, and later by a Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship. The comprehensive training in economics he received at Chicago included Milton Friedman's famous course in price and allocation theory (microeconomics), Arnold Harberger's cost-benefit analysis course, and courses in agricultural policy by D. Gale Johnson. These teachers inspired much of his future research and teaching. When he and Friedman next met more than two decades later here in Australia Ross, with uncharacteristic but obvious pride, afterwards remarked to several of his friends: 'Milton remembered me'. The Chicago School's stress on the relationship between free choice, free markets and people's welfare, resonated with strands of thought he had picked up in his undergraduate days through the Freethought Society.

In 1959 he returned to the University of Sydney to lecture in agricultural economics where he wrote several important papers on pricing policies for the dairy and wool industries. He also made substantial contributions to the public debate on those topics by way of submissions to public inquiries and articles for current affairs publications. Articles written for wider audiences on education and consumer affairs reflected his interest in issues outside agricultural economics.

In 1964 Ross moved to the University of New England (UNE) in Armidale, first as Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics and later as Professor of Economics.

His UNE colleagues were a talented and enthusiastic group and attracted good students, especially graduate students, from all over Australia. This was fertile ground for his ideas on economics and economic analysis. His approach to teaching was unorthodox. Long before it became fashionable he adopted a problem-oriented approach, using examples from current issues such as military conscription, the allocation of broadcasting licences and bottle recycling, as well as agricultural policies. He often came to class without notes, relying solely on impromptu discussion of some economic gaffe

he had found in *The Bulletin* or a newspaper to drive home an important principle. Although this approach was by no means universally successful, many of the remarkably high proportion of UNE agricultural economics and economics students from this era who went on to outstanding careers in universities, consultancies, agribusiness, agripolitics and government readily acknowledge Ross's profound influence on their thinking. As one of his UNE colleagues recently stated: 'Ross made microeconomics a respectable area of economic analysis in Australia.'

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With Keynesian economics very much ascendant in most other Australian universities at the time, this is high but entirely justified praise. He was elected President of the Australian Agricultural Economics Society for 1968. In 1994 the UNE made him an Honorary Doctor of Economics.

In the 12 years he spent at the University of Sydney and UNE Ross did much to prepare the way for later

agricultural policy reforms and to infuse rational debate into many issues outside agriculture, including policies for international trade, the environment, education, and broadcasting. In a lively public debate held in the mid-1960s at the UNE he and a colleague, Jack Duloy,



he and a colleague, Jack Duloy, opposed to the redoubtable Sir William Gunn and another industry leader, Bill (later Sir William) Vines, warned of the likely dire consequences of regulating wool prices. The collapse of the Reserve Price Scheme in the early 1990s for the reasons Ross predicted—a massive build-up of wool stocks—is testimony to the prescience of his

warning. A consultancy with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation in 1966 in Rome and visiting appointments in 1967 at Oxford and Stanford broadened his perspective on agricultural policies. In 1971 he left UNE to spend three years at the World Bank in Washington where he wrote a series of innovative papers on issues in cost-benefit analysis.

In 1973 Ross returned to Australia to a chair in the Department of Economics at Monash University which he held until his retirement and elevation to Professor Emeritus at the end of 1993. Although he gained his

early reputation through research into agricultural policies, he was equally proficient in applying the basic principles of price and resource allocation theory in other spheres of economic and social activity. Topics he wrote on at Monash University included non-price rationing mechanisms, education, the environment and recycling, consumer protection, voting systems, residential tenancy laws, land tenure, agricultural subsidies, agriculture in the Australian economy, welfare spending, cost-benefit analysis of road safety measures, and the transition economies. His interests in some of these areas developed through his involvements in official inquiries and World Bank assignments in Yugoslavia and Mauritius.

Ross was very much a political economist. Conscious of the complexity of humans, he regarded 'economic man' as no more than a useful caricature of human behaviour. He was convinced of the power of freely functioning markets to promote human welfare by creating incentives for producers to strive to satisfy the idiosyncratic demands of people. In contrast, he regarded political processes and governments as essentially beyond the control of the individual and as creating scope and incentives for organised interest groups to gain in various ways to the detriment of others in society. At the same time, he was acutely aware of the importance of time-honed and time-tested institutions, including government-supported institutions, in creating conditions conducive to efficient markets. He was also very conscious of the limitations of economic policies based on simplistic economic models that failed to take adequate account of institutional factors and adjustment costs.

His public activities reflected his commitment to promoting informed and rational debate on economic and social issues. He was a foundation member of the H.R. Nicholls Society, an organisation formed to press for fundamental reform of Australia's industrial relations system. He regularly attended meetings of the Adam Smith Club, the Samuel Griffith Society and the Institute of Public Affairs and he was accepted into the Mont Pelerin Society, an international organisation aimed at promoting free societies. And, of course, he was a strong and proud supporter of CIS.

Ross's association with CIS started in 1977 (the year after its formation). Through his extensive network of academic colleagues, friends and acquaintances he helped to bring to the CIS's conference and publication programmes many people able and willing to package and disseminate ideas and views on relationships

between people's welfare and markets and political systems. His refereeing and editing did much to maintain the uniformly high quality of CIS publications. In particular, he spent a lot of time and effort editing a landmark academic paper on the political economy of agricultural subsidies written by his friend, Ted Sieper, an ANU economist. The resultant book, *Rationalising Rustic Regulation*, published in 1982, greatly strengthened CIS's reputation in academic and government circles. His innumerable insightful forewords to CIS publications provided useful guidance for thinking about the material that followed. At the same time he helped Greg Lindsay to build a public profile for the CIS that facilitated fundraising activities.

From the beginning of their association Ross and Greg found that they had much to offer each other. As outlined above, Ross brought to CIS a wealth of experience and rigorous thinking on a broad range of economic and social issues. He was also a continuing source of encouragement and a valuable sounding board for Greg's ideas and plans. His unfailingly good nature, lively mind, and natural poise and dignity gave him the capacity to persuade others of the importance of the CIS in the intellectual life of Australia. In return CIS—the embodiment of Greg's vision, organisational skills and enthusiasm—gave Ross an outlet for his lifelong urge to promote open and informed public debate on economic, political and social issues. Although failing health greatly restricted the time and effort he could give to CIS in his retirement years, the character of the organisation still reflects his influence and will continue to reflect it for many years to come.

Ross was widely respected by his colleagues and friends and, his strong views on economic and social issues notwithstanding, had few, if any, enemies. He was a talented essayist, writing for magazines and newspapers on a wide range of topics including country music, consumer protection, education, and methods for selecting members of parliament. He was also a largely self-taught, skilled line-drawer. The breadth of his interests and the depth of his insights into so many facets of human existence made him a most interesting companion and he formed many long-lasting friendships. In the words of one of his former Monash colleagues, Ross Parish was a 'class act'. His untimely death has deprived us of the fruits of what had promised to be a very productive retirement. He is survived by his daughters Julia, Lucy, Virginia, and Catherine, who gave wonderfully loving care through the long period of his illness.