Memories of Bob Tollison: memories of a friendship

Robert B. Ekelund¹

Received: 20 December 2016 / Accepted: 31 January 2017 / Published online: 20 February 2017
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2017

My memories of Bob Tollison begin in some halcyon days. First, a short timeline: I was a terrible undergraduate student, except for economics, literature, art and history, but I was redeemed as a doctoral student of economics at Louisiana State University. A wonderful blend of scholars taught me how to conduct research and how to think about and “do” economics. The job market favored the seller’s side when I received my degree in January 1967 and of numerous job offers, I was urged by my brilliant mentor, Professor James Payne, to go with Texas A&M. A&M was building its Ph.D. program with the help of a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant. There, my recently acquired work ethic was enlivened in the company of two fellow Aggie acquisitions, Phil Gramm (later a US Senator) and the late Charles Maurice. We worked constantly, with interruptions for beers and pizza, to develop our skills and to publish (the *sine qua non* of the day). Still in our mid-twenties, we taught graduate courses and directed both graduate and undergraduate programs and supervised dissertations. Many of our students were our own age.

Meanwhile, the department began adding wonderful and productive scholars to its roster: Charles Ferguson, Tom Saving, Erick Furubotn, Bob Basmann, Raymond Battalio, John Kagel and others. An NSF grant permitted visits of scholars such as Armen Alchian, George Stigler and Oskar Morgenstern. Policy studies in the many fields of microeconomic application, in the heady early days of the department, were priorities and the areas of antitrust and other economic policy suggested the addition of specialists in those areas. Thus in 1973 two such economists, Robert D. Tollison, recently of Cornell University and the Council of Economic Advisers, and James Miller were recruited (I had by this time become a full professor). Bob, who became department head the following year, taught graduate classes in public choice, industrial organization and antitrust. He became a true mentor for a coterie of graduate students, such as Bobby McCormick, Mark Crain, Bill Shughart, Paul Pautler and many more. Soon he became an electric jolt to my already

✉ Robert B. Ekelund
bobekelund@prodigy.net

¹ Auburn University, Auburn, AL, USA

functioning workaholicism and, in short order, he became my best friend, remaining so until his passing in October 2016.

Much is lost in the fog of time, but looking back, it is hard to believe that Bob and I were *actual* colleagues for only 4 years. My two major areas in graduate teaching were the history of economic theory and the economics of regulation, the latter of which overlapped with Bob's chief areas of interest. We naturally developed more in common as Bob also became interested in history of thought as well, as he did with virtually *all* other areas of economics. The subject was always economics at school in Bob's or my office, or with graduate students or at the many parties and informal get-togethers. Bob and I both thought that *economics* was synonymous with "*having fun*." My "thought" interests had led me to write a book on the *History of Economic Theory and Method*, first published in 1976 with my other great friend Bob Hebert. I remember discussing the wonderful work of Milton Friedman with Tollison on the building of incentives into public welfare programs and it occurred to us that John Stuart Mill had similar ideas. That began a series of papers, beginning in 1976 dealing with history of thought. Throughout our careers, Bob and I saw the clear links between contemporary economic theory, economic history and writings of the great economists of the past, including Aristotle, Adam Smith, Nassau Senior, Carl Menger, Gustav Schmoller, the mercantilists and other great thinkers.

Bob often referred to our group as a "shop" and I want to characterize what I see as the essence of Bob's approach to economics and to life based on this early experience. Bob's interactions with graduate students and colleagues clearly resembled the concept of a "medieval shop." Those shops existed as entities wherein a "master" developed, directed and worked with apprentices or other "masters" to produce multiple outputs with the pooled inputs. They contained varying combinations of individuals, not unlike the great artist Verrocchio's artistic "shop" in Florence where Leonardo da Vinci and many other artistic hopefuls apprenticed, combined and recombined to work on different works. Bob would guide multiple projects with everyone's ideas considered as inputs in free and open discussion. Publications flowed from this system, that only broadened through time. If one was willing to work hard, the absolute necessity for membership, and contribute ideas and effort into economic problems and issues, you became a member of the team. That was Bob's *modus operandi* his whole academic life. He would feed ideas to be developed by his lucky friends and students but he would also be receptive to working with the ideas of others. To him, hard work was the keystone to success! It was and continued to be, in other words, a modern version of the "medieval shop."

Back to the timeline. Perhaps our most interesting idea came about, as they often did, while relaxing or at leisure. In the summer of 1976, Bob and I often gathered about Phil and Wendy Gramm's swimming pool to take sun and drink beer. My memory is accurate on one thing—Phil's acerbic and terrific mother was visiting from Georgia and she entered the conversation one day with the two of us. Sam Peltzman's seminal article on rent-seeking regulation and politics had just appeared and I had assigned it to my summer graduate class on the economics of regulation. Bob, already a young leader in public choice analysis, was also acquainted with the paper. I had also read and assigned through the years the great economist Eli Hechscher's book on mercantilism to my thought class. Bob also knew of this masterpiece and soon we began to discuss Hechscher's analysis of mercantilism and its possible relation to Peltzman's new theory. Then and there, after a few more beers and a few interjections by Phil's mom, we decided to go much more deeply into this subject. Along with several papers on the subject, we produced a book noting that internal mercantilism was a rent-seeking and rational policy of monarchs in England and France, one that lost power with the ascendance of Parliament in England and one which held a

death-grip on trade and growth in France. That idea, later made familiar by Douglass North, presents an alternative and complement to the “litany of ideas” concept of what mercantilism was (Ekelund and Tollison 1981, 1997). It is an idea that continues to receive high praise as well as acute criticism—just as Bob and I would have it.¹

I believe that in those salad days Bob’s method of thinking and working and my own were perfect complements and we both recognized it. While each of pursued our own ideas and worked constantly and very well with others, we both felt that a significant part of our mutual success depended in large measure on working together. Bob found this same ideal with many friends and former students, notably Bill Shughart and Mark Crain and others. We both enjoyed being part of a group of friends, students and scholars who in so many combinations of pooled skills, specializations and ideas as a team or, to continue the analogy, our “medieval shop.” The lack of jealousy or acrimony in the group was and is astonishing. Bob always believed that it was the *idea* that was key—who got first author or any credit at all for it was secondary. Further, and most important, he always heralded the success of friends and others who worked and achieved. It was an astonishing and formative time for all of us.

Essentially these scholarly partnerships continued even after Bob departed Texas A&M in 1977 and I moved to Auburn University permanently in January 1979. Indeed they *expanded* as Tollison, his students and I brought new individuals into the group at our respective destinations. Our curricula vitae clearly reveal that. But Bob’s and my academic partnership was not over—it was only beginning. Between 1981 and 1983 Bob was enjoying a stint at the FTC as Director of the Bureau of Economics. He brought me up for a brief summer “internship” in 1982 and we worked and continuously discussed possible projects. Both of us wanted to write a “principles” text and on a road trip from a Washington, D.C. academic conference to Clemson (Bob’s next destination) we casually outlined the *entire* book. He drove my car while I took notes. With a first edition published in 1986, the book went through seven editions (the last with my former student and friend Rand Ressler who had worked in the “shop” before). While some scholars disparage textbook writing, we were quite proud of the outcome.

Academically Bob and I continued to pursue interesting ideas, again using complementary skills. The major direction was towards the then-nascent field of economics applied to religion. It began for us in 1987 with a riff on the famous paper on the “pope and the price of fish.” We extended that well-known idea to the relation of religion to the price of beef. But, further, we began to combine interests in medieval religious history and industrial organization to examine the economic organization of the church (Ekelund et al. 1989). At the same time, other economists were delving into the economics of religion from similar perspectives and from a microeconomic behavioral view. We pushed forward the proposition that the medieval church and its policies (usury, the crusades, the invention of purgatory, and so one) were aimed at creating and maintaining a monopoly, inventing and altering its services and strictures to price discriminate for profit, and as a competitive device. That, of course, invited entry (the Protestant Reformation). This journey of two decades took us (with Robert Hebert, Audrey Davidson and Gary Anderson) to many papers and three books (e.g. Ekelund et al. 1996, 2008; Ekelund et al. 2002, 2011). In those three books, an economic history of the organization of the Roman Church was outlined

¹ Only 4 days before his death, Bob and I discussed and began to outline yet another book on mercantilism—one focusing on *contemporary* mercantilism with new historical precedents.

from its inception to the present day.² Bob was proud of this achievement and its contribution to the economics of religion.

The concept of Bob building and helping to guide a “shop” that deals with economics in its myriad applications is again apt. Bob’s “shop” was not a place and his lucky friends, students and colleagues were not stationary. Individuals in the group often worked alone, but all kept Bob’s interest and support when necessary. When one of the “group” or a friend of the group needed some academic productivity for tenure and promotion, Bob was always there with research ideas (with two or three a day he could always afford to be generous) to help, expecting nothing in return.

And Bob was never “finished.” I have never been able to shake a lifelong and intensely passionate interest in art and art history. Before *my* retirement from academics in 2003 (Bob never retired) I developed in conjunction with Rand Ressler and Keith Watson, with some of the ideas from Bob, a few papers integrating art and economic concepts. Those and other ideas excited Bob and our good friend and colleague at Auburn, John Jackson. Together we published several papers on early American art and investment, auction estimates and artistic productivity. Our extended studies into the economics of both early and contemporary American art led to a book in press—*The Economics of American Art: Issues, Artists and Market Institutions* (forthcoming, 2017, Oxford University Press). This *may* be Bob’s last book; as I noted earlier we outlined a new book less than a week before his passing on the “new mercantilism.”

I would like to provide the reader an idea of what working with Bob was like in closing this intensely personal memoir. Bob was the most even tempered man I ever knew as well as the most creative and he supported me in every crazy endeavor and in all my hobbies.³ His calm demeanor smoothed out the erratic. To him, triumphs and tragedies were to be regarded as the imposters they both are, to misquote a poet. But working with him presented certain problems. No one ever taught Bob or he refused to learn to write legibly. Over four decades I eased into being able to decipher a hand that looked to be a combination of cuneiform and hieroglyphics. I suspect that few, except his most frequent co-authors, especially Bill Shughart, and his wife Anna, the love of his life, could do that. Second, communication through typed material, either by typewriter or later by computer, would seem the natural antidote. But Bob never learned to type! Since we met physically on quite rare occasions, telephone discussion and “dictation” became our means of communication. Often, working on multiple projects simultaneously meant that Bob and I spoke by telephone practically every day—literally—for 40 years. But he had another problem. He never understood that I, a night person by nature, lived in the Central Time Zone and that he was in the Eastern. Bob was an early riser and thinker by nature and I would get his first call of the day to “talk economics” at 6:30 AM. He thought that I was up and at work by 7:30 AM which I often was, but on Central time. He would apologize

² More recently, with the critical aid of Randy Beard, George Ford and sociologist Ben Gaskins, an interface between religious belief and contemporary political trends were analyzed (Beard et al. 2013).

³ The ongoing rosary of ideas that poured from his mind was astonishing. On a not too distant day, I remember three calls from Bob with new ideas for us or for any colleague or poor student who needed to complete some research. They included tests for how squirrels’ discount rates worked; the use of cholesterol medication to reduce the incidence of heart attacks; the survey of Protestant hymnals in the post-Reformation period to determine the lengths, numbers and characters of hymns; a survey (surely to be done by me) of pre-and-post Reformation Renaissance art to ascertain where the faithful in the pictures were looking (down, Roman Catholicism, up, a more direct approach to the Deity); a survey of the length of classical symphonic music as the twentieth century progressed—time costs, you know! And on and on, virtually every day!

saying that he forgot the time difference and would call later, but the damage was done. The solution was to keep pen and paper next to the bed. What I wouldn't give to get those early calls again!

Bob's conversation turned to a philosophical and spiritual view of life in recent years and in the months preceding his passing. We would mull over eternal verities, the past, the "shop" at Texas A&M, the things and people who were important to us and the potential things we would leave at least for a time. Notably, the deep feeling that in a heartbeat we would do it all again was always present. "Things material" and pure politics meant nothing to Bob. Family, particularly his wife Anna who gave him vital support and love through the years, his friends, and economics meant everything to him. In one of our last conversations he reflected on the satisfaction he had in a life well spent. He dedicated our penultimate book to me as one "who never takes his oar out of the water." That is a description and a tribute I now return to him. He was a man and a mind in full. RIP my friend. Your spirit will always be with me and with all who knew you. How could I forget the most exciting and interesting adventure of my life?

References

- Beard, T. R., Ekelund, R. B., Jr., Ford, G., Gaskins, B., & Tollison, R. D. (2013). Secularism, religion and political choice in the United States. *Politics and Religion*, 6(4), 753–777.
- Ekelund, R. B., Jr., Hebert, R. F., & Tollison, R. D. (1989). An economic model of the Medieval Church: Usury as a form of rent seeking. *Journal of Law Economics and Organization*, 5, 307–331.
- Ekelund, R. B., Jr., Hebert, R. F., & Tollison, R. D. (2008). *The marketplace of Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ekelund, R. B., Jr., Hebert, R. F., Tollison, R. D., Anderson, G. M., & Davidson, A. (1996). *Sacred trust: The Medieval Church as an economic firm*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ekelund, R. B., Jr., Jackson, J. D., & Tollison, R. D. (2017). *The economics of American art: Issues, artists and market institutions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ekelund, R. B., Jr., & Tollison, R. D. (1981). *Mercantilism as a rent-seeking society: Economic regulation in historical perspective*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Ekelund, R. B., Jr., & Tollison, R. D. (1997). *Politicized economies: Monarchs, monopoly and Mercantilism*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Ekelund, R. B., Hebert, R. F., & Tollison, R. D. (2002). An economic analysis of the Protestant Reformation. *Journal of Political Economy*, 110(3), 646–672.
- Ekelund, R. B., Jr., & Tollison, R. D. (2011). *Economic origins of roman christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.