

The Duncan Black Papers

Saving Them, by Iain McLean (Nuffield College, Oxford)

Duncan Black (1908-91) was as self-effacing in death as in life. His towering reputation in the US public choice community (hailed by Gordon Tullock as ‘the father of us all’) was scarcely matched elsewhere – an interesting exception being Italy. He was very proud of his election late in life to the Accademia dei Lincei and to a Senior Fellowship of the British Academy.

Nevertheless his self-perception was modest. In a 1974 letter to Sir Geoffrey Keynes asking about a putative common ancestor, Duncan Black described himself as ‘an economist ..., not a very good one, I admit, and I wondered whether I might have some distant connection with your late distinguished brother’.

Like everyone else in social choice I admired his pioneering *Theory of Committees and Elections* (1958); knew some of the frustrating prehistory of that work, conceived as a ‘pure science of Politics’ while Black was fire watching in Warwick Castle during World War II; and particularly admired his discovery that the equally lonely Lewis Carroll (C. L. Dodgson) had had an insight into the fundamental paradoxes of social choice matched only by Condorcet. What Condorcet, Dodgson, and Black had in common was that almost nobody understood their great work when it appeared. My only personal encounter with Black was when he wrote to ask for no fewer than 12 copies of a working paper I had semi-published containing translations from Condorcet’s extensive work in social choice.

Rather sadly but typically, therefore, it was only in May 1991 that I heard that he had died four months earlier. The recovery of his papers came by a happier route. William H. Riker (1920-92), the discoverer and patron of Black in the USA, was visiting Oxford for the term. He showed me a letter he had received from Zachary Rolnik, a former student of his who by then was a senior editor at Kluwer Academic and had published the 1987 reprint of *Committees and Elections*. The letter informed Bill Riker that Lloyds Bank (Executor and Trustee) in Torquay had notified Kluwer of a bequest from Duncan Black for the republication of his papers. The residuary legatee was Motherwell Cricket Club, where Black’s sister had made the teas in the 1940s. What should we do about this? After a few phone calls, including one to the cricket club, who were considerate and helpful throughout, the answer was a trip to Torquay as soon as it could be arranged.

I arrived there a few weeks later with Zachary Rolnik. Black’s last house had been a 1930s villa on the sea front at Paignton. It had magnificent views but serious subsidence in the front garden – a blessing in disguise for the history of economic thought, as it meant that the house had not yet been cleared for sale. By another stroke of luck, the agent handling the sale of Black’s effects was a neighbour of Richard Alexander, an economist at the nearby Royal Naval College. Acting on his own initiative, Mr Alexander offered the Black archive to Black’s *almae matres* Bangor (which declined it) and Glasgow (which accepted it, but had as yet done nothing to collect it).

On that first visit Zachary and I were elated and depressed. Elated to see that copious manuscripts for the Penelope's web of Black's last years – his book on Lewis Carroll which has now been reconstructed and published¹ - were scattered around, together with other treasures. A copy of Condorcet's extremely scarce *Mémoire sur le calcul intégral* (1767) nestled in a broken cardboard box otherwise full of odd slippers. Depressed by the disorder and multiplicity of the material, Zachary and I started to stuff rubbish into black bags but reflected that we had neither the stamina nor the skills for the job. I returned in the autumn with a colleague who was made of sterner stuff – Vanna Skelly from Glasgow University Archives. Matters had now become urgent as the house had been sold. Vanna arranged to dump the obvious rubbish and crate the rest of the archive to Glasgow.

The archive was now physically safe in a converted warehouse, but there was no money to catalogue it. I applied to the Economic and Social Research Council and was turned down on the grounds that conservation of papers of deceased economists was outside their remit. Considerably annoyed by this, I appealed, pointing out that their own aims and scope statement pointed out that it was not. I secured letters of support from several eminent economists, my prize catch being Kenneth Arrow, whom I had met on a recent sabbatical at Stanford. We shared an interest in the history of social choice and had had several discussions of Condorcet, Lewis Carroll, and Duncan Black. Whether or not it was awed by the lustre of Arrow's name, the ESRC relented and awarded me a grant to catalogue the archive. I appointed Alistair McMillan as the project Research Officer. A supplementary grant from the Newlands Fund of Glasgow University enabled the third member of the team – Burt Monroe, then a D.Phil student at Oxford – to go to Glasgow and help Alistair for some of the time.

Cataloguing Them, by Alistair McMillan (Department of Politics, University of Sheffield)

I spent six months in Glasgow cataloguing the Duncan Black Archive. The archive was not situated in the beautiful hilltop courtyard with the University of Glasgow's main archives, but in a former industrial building adjacent to a working flour mill in Thurso Street, just off campus. The process of cataloguing the archive was largely a case of trying to impose some order on the piles of material rescued by McLean and Rolnik; record basic information about the contents; and ensure the papers were preserved in a fit state. The latter process was probably the most time consuming, involving the removal of a million rusting staples and paper-clips and their replacement with benign plastic clips.

It was a slightly melancholic experience, spending a Glasgow winter closeted in a windowless, warehouse getting to know about Duncan Black. The majority of original material in the archive consisted of notebooks he had filled in his retirement, which dwelt upon a series of disappointments and resentments. Black felt that the original insights of his great work of the 1940s, dealing with the complexity of decision making between more than two choices, reflected his own emotional turbulence of that time. He repeatedly revisited the circumstances and emotional

¹ I. McLean, A. McMillan and B. L. Monroe, *A Mathematical Approach to Proportional Representation: Duncan Black on Lewis Carroll* (Dordrecht: Kluwer 1996).

complexities of his marriage. Black's feeling that he was denied credit for his original ideas was a repeated complaint (the archives provided plenty of documents which justified his resentment), overwhelming the recognition he got from eminent friends like Ronald Coase and the American political scientists who feted him and his contribution.

Black was not just an important originator of ideas, but (somewhat paradoxically) followed up his original thoughts by discovering a history to them. His work on Charles Dodgson relates to important research on electoral systems analysis in the nineteenth century, and he helped reawaken interest in the political philosophy of Condorcet. Black's feeling that his intellectual insights were closely linked to his personal emotional state meant that his reflections on the discovery of an intellectual history to the discipline of social choice were submerged by a series of speculations on the psychological state of Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll). This tied his work into a series of psychoanalytic interpretations of Dodgson's work and a whole industry of Lewis Carroll studies. The attempt to put this work in some sort of context had its joys (re-reading the *Alice* books) but did involve some frustration (Freudian analyses of the *Hunting of the Snark*).

The off-prints, mimeographs, and articles in the Duncan Black Archive gave me my introduction to social choice theory, and provide an important record of how that field developed in the 1960s and 1970s.

It could have been an unpleasant experience if I had not had the support of the University of Glasgow Archival team. Whenever I got into work at Thurso St I would meet Jim Nixon, with whom I had a great relationship despite never really understanding what he was saying in his impenetrable Glasgow accent. I was looked after by Alma Topen and Vanna Skelly who were in charge of the other University of Glasgow Archives, and who taught me to do the job that I was doing properly. Michael Moss was a generous overseer.

Iain McLean provided intellectual direction, and kept in touch through the new technology of email. Burt Monroe, then finishing off his Oxford DPhil, joined me in Glasgow to examine the papers and discuss voting theory over a pint of heavy.

It was a productive endeavour. As well as the catalogue of the Duncan Black archive, the team led by Iain McLean produced two edited books covering Black's published and unpublished work and an article in the *Journal of Theoretical Politics* on Duncan Black and Lewis Carroll. The papers Black had collected on voting theory from the nineteenth century formed the basis of my MPhil thesis on the development of the electoral system between the second and third Reform Acts.