Learningguild Letter

2.2005

Dear members and friends of Learningguild,

With this issue of our *Letter* comes a supplement: the text of a talk I gave at Learningguild's annual day conference in philosophy of religion on the 8th of December. In Section 4 is the proposal that, rather than being content with Martin Buber's emphasis on "meeting" or "encounter" and "relationship", we say: "Central to a fully human life is responsive cooperation." This theme is developed in that and the following section, with reference to "schools and universities … workplaces … families and marriages" and to the activity of criticism at its best. Here I shall say more about responsive cooperation, first in relation to competition, then on the meaning we may give to 'responsive' and on how we might answer the question "Why should I engage in this responsive cooperation?", and finally concerning Learningguild itself.

How important it is to reach a just view of competition in relation to cooperation. Little Athletics, for example, has often been vitiated by parents too eager that their child should beat others, when what matters most is that all the children should enjoy a range of physical exercise and engaging in it with those others. Yet if a child said that he or she did not want to compete at all, something would be lost: the experience of seeking to "measure up", and to emulate another's superior performance. But that experience too should be set in the context of cooperation: we often need competition with one another in order to reach our full potential, and so we should esteem our rivals in fair competition. Above all, we should attend to the value (or lack of it) in our activities, much more than to our competitive success in them. For example, it is inevitable that there be competition for entry to well-regarded universities; but it is absurd when (as in Latin in Victoria in recent years) the VCE syllabus is so intellectually undemanding that the diligence that the student seeking the highest possible marks must display does little to make him or her a deeper or wider thinker.

The process of reaching a fair decision concerning candidates competing for a scholarship or a job is a necessary and salutary part of human life. Choose a relatively weak or complacent or unscrupulous candidate, and you are being unfair not only to better ones (who may not have applied this time) but also to those whom the person chosen will deal with, more or less inadequately, in future. As through good super-

vision of a postgraduate student, people can benefit by becoming acquainted with, and seeking to satisfy, the best criteria that experienced judges apply: not least those of energy ("fire in the belly", Professor Wright of Physiology at Melbourne used to say) and eagerness; a track record of reliability, perseverance, and readiness to cooperate; and evidence of originality.

In a good society, however, competition should play a relatively minor role compared with responsive cooperation in activities valuable normally both in themselves and for their consequences (as Glaucon has it in Plato's *Republic*, 357f). I introduced the adjective 'responsive' in my paper as a result of observing that it was in fact **un**responsiveness, especially to persons, that both Martin Buber and his translator Ronald Gregor Smith saw as so detrimental to human life. What then is it to be responsive in the deepest sense of the word? First it is to attend closely enough to what someone says and does (whether one is already cooperating with him or her or not) that one comes to appreciate, in the specific form in which they occur, some of the desires, needs, commitments and possibilities of that particular person, whether in one's family or group (such as Learningguild) or one's workplace. Then comes the willingness to think about whether there is some contribution, large or small, that one could appropriately make to the realization of that person's desires to flourish, to do good work, to achieve a certain level, and so on. If there is, there is the delicate matter of offering it tactfully, with respect for what one knows of the detail of the other's life, and also gladly; and, if the offer is accepted, of providing it in the same spirit. Sometimes one discerns what the other could do to help in a project he or she might be glad to assist with, as when I ask people who can pay little for tuition if they would do the very valuable work of collating or folding or stapling Learningguild literature. Responsiveness is not always easy, for it requires a readiness to do one's best; and a sign that one is attempting too much is that one has become insufficiently responsive, especially to those closest to one.

"Why should I engage", someone might ask, "in this responsive cooperation?" To appreciate it is very hard for anyone who has not experienced it. He or she may hear about it from someone who has; but the best answer may be "Try it and see." To come to care about someone else's success or about what you can achieve together, and to enjoy the cooperation, can liberate one from being self-preoccupied. To find that books, articles, problems, words and ideas discovered can be shared in discussion sometimes excited, sometimes patient, can be exhilarating. Yet there is something deeper. We cannot fulfil our own possibilities without helping others to fulfil theirs. T.H.Green, the Oxford philosopher of the 19th century to whom I am greatly indebted, took extremely seriously the notion of a common good, but also recognized the widespread tendency of the prosperous to take it less than seriously because they wanted to preserve their competitive advantages. Consider these passages from *Prolegomena to Ethics*, sec. 244f, in relation to the preoccupation of many Australians with their own children's competitive success rather than with seeking to ensure an abundance of opportunities for all to develop their capacities to think, to learn, to develop skills which they can employ to their own and others' benefit, to be creative, and thereby to be happy.

> The conviction of a community of good for all men can never be really harmonised with our notions of what is good, so long as anything else than self-devotion to an ideal of mutual service is the end by reference to which those notions are formed. … Civil

> society may be, and is, founded on the idea of there being a common good, but that idea in relation to the less favoured members of society is in effect unrealised, and it is unrealised because the good is being sought in objects which admit of being competed for. … The success of some in attaining them is incompatible with the success of others. Until the object generally sought as good comes to be a state of mind or character of which the attainment, or approach to attainment, by each is itself a contribution to its attainment by every one else, social life must continue to be one of war ….

Green is not saying that there should be no competition for anything, but that we should want above all to see and to contribute towards societies, larger and smaller, in which no groups or individuals are deprived of abundant opportunity to develop their capacities to enhance their own and others' lives to the greatest extent possible.

It is a difficult question how far and in what respects such contributions can best be made through state-maintained organizations, and so largely paid for by taxation, or through voluntary bodies committed to ideals of service which are hard to sustain where governments are in ultimate control. One way of dealing with that problem is to look for energetic leaders of state-maintained schools, hospitals and so on who will show the way to diverse forms of education, or of care of patients or clients, and to give them more scope for leadership, and for promotion of people of special merit and energy, than may be attractive to such organizations as teachers' unions. But there can be no doubt of the great need of voluntary bodies such as our movement Learningguild.

What can Learningguild do? To begin with, we can and must give high priority to inviting and welcoming many people, often with very little money, who are underprivileged in our society because they have too little English to be able to communicate generally with Australians. Some of them are in our schools and universities but do not get there the individual and systematic guidance that they need; some would love to exercise the skills they used in their original country, but lack the language skills to be attractive prospects for employment here. But we should not only provide individual tuition (and therefore have more people able and willing to teach, sometimes without much or in special cases any financial remuneration): we should provide hospitality through special events and where possible to individuals or families in our own homes or on journeys in our own cars.

We can develop our range of publications and the Learningguild Library, so that, for example, people who want to gain a certain level in the IELTS test can readily buy or borrow materials that will help them to do so. We can lend young migrant couples such things as gardening equipment to help them to be more self-sufficient. We can maintain our support of schools and other institutions in India and Cambodia.

Those of us who have many advantages can also enjoy and talk about what we gain from Learningguild: from this issue, for example, of our *Letter*, with its articles based in most cases on talks given at Friday-evening meetings, and from the informal conversations over supper that are such a delight at those meetings. We can, in part thereby, develop our own capacities and opportunities for cooperation.

Yours,

John Howes

Growing up in Australia as the Son of Greek Immigrants

STRATOS FILIS, *after graduating in Arts at the University of Melbourne and gaining his Diploma of Education, worked as a teacher and later as a tram conductor and driver, and is now an interpreter at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. A member of Learningguild, he talked about his life, and especially his boyhood and young manhood, to the Friday-evening group on October 7th.*

In preparing my talk I did not feel very happy about raking things up that I have finally managed to put behind me. Of course I could have put together a talk that mentioned only my successes and glossed over the overwhelming difficulties I faced as a child and as a teenager; but members of Learningguild deserved to hear the full reality of my upbringing.

My parents George and Constandina migrated to Melbourne in 1960 and 1961 respectively. They were from the same village in the north-west of Lesbos (also known as Mytilene), but because they were agricultural labourers who worked in many different parts of the island they never actually met until they came to Melbourne. My father knew my mother's father but he had never met her.

My father came to Melbourne by air. He was brought out by the Menzies government's immigration program and, like most of the Greeks who left the fatherland in those days, he believed that his stay in Australia would be for about three or four years: just enough to save a tidy sum to enable him to live in his village. It is very difficult for me to describe the intensity of my father's feelings for his island home. I do not think that there are words in any language that can describe his love for his land and his desire to live there. All I know is that ever since my birth I was surrounded by this overpowering, obsessive, ineffable passion of my father's to live on Lesbos. It permeated my entire existence.

When I was about twelve months old my father persuaded my mother that it was time to return, to settle back in the village. Therefore we boarded the *Patris* at Port Melbourne in 1966, and a six-week voyage took us through the Suez Canal to Piraeus. The happiest photographs of my father in his entire life are the photographs of his return to the fatherland. I look at them and I see him beaming and radiating so much joy.

Greece is a difficult country to live in even today. The class differences are still very prominent and social services are very limited. At the time of my father's return there was a lot of poverty and political turmoil. The social reality of the class you were born into completely dominated what you could hope to do in life. All our clothes had patches on the knees and the elbows. Buying new clothes was quite unthinkable. Every second song on the radio was about the impossible love story of two people from different classes. The country was in the grip of the cold war.

Greece had had a civil war from 1946 to 1949. In it the Communists and Socialists were defeated only militarily. The Government was very much aware that the majority of the Greek people would be voting them out if they could only have free and fair elections. On the 21st of April 1967 a gang of criminals with the rank of colonel overthrew the civilian government and the repression began. My father's brother-in-law was arrested and put in gaol for months for the crime of being a member of one of the two Communist parties. There were informers watching which newspaper people were reading. There was fear of talking to known leftists. There was censorship.

I shall never forget the day my father and I entered the house of a leftist dissenter who was hanging from the rafters. I was too young even to understand that he was dead. I realized something was wrong when I heard the elderly black-clad women wailing outside. Once the criminals had taken power, nobody in the village would risk speaking to him. He became lonely and killed himself.

My father's dream of living in Greece soured quickly. We had very little, I became ill, and much of the money the poor man had saved was spent trying to keep me alive. Even today in Greece it can be exorbitantly expensive if something goes wrong with your health. My father was forced to return to Melbourne to make more money. I remember his absence. He came back to Greece and tried to stay put, but conflict with members of his own family, poverty, political repression and the birth of my sister and brother did not permit him to live his beloved dream. He departed for Australia and we followed a few months later, arriving before the Christmas of 1971.

My father was quite happy to have a new start but the happiness lasted for about three months. After that he started to become embittered. The worst came when we moved into our own home in Stewart Street, Brunswick. I shudder whenever I go past that house. While we were living in Middle Park together with our cousins, father had behaved differently. In Brunswick, however, for the first time in our lives we were not permitted to go anywhere outside of home. The worst time for us was the school holidays. We would die of boredom. We would play in the garage and the small back yard. Sometimes we would break a window with a ball. Then we would all be very frightened of our father's reaction. He would lose his temper as usual on seeing the broken window: "We are killing ourselves to bring you up and you are MONSTERS! MONSTERS is what you are!"

Mother worked evening shift in a restaurant in Russell Street where the staff all spoke Greek. Not knowing any English, it was one of the few places where she could work. Despite working so hard she would get up early in the morning to prepare our lunches and take us to school. For years and years she would wash all our clothes by hand. All their money went into the mortgage. My father used to go out to the Greek café but he never spent even one cent at the TAB. His main fault at that time was not being able to understand that the children also needed some entertainment and stability, and also that it is not right to thump one's children on the top of the head.

Unfortunately our father's behaviour became more caustic and sarcastic as we grew and reached adolescence. It always seemed to me that he became so embittered because he could not realise his dream of living in Greece and therefore he had to crush his children's dreams. My parents bought me an encyclopedia when I was twelve. My entertainment was reading it, but this used to annoy my parents very much and especially

my father. Although my teachers at school always commented on the high quality of my schoolwork and good results, all my sister and I ever heard from our father was how stupid and useless we were. My sister would have become the State champion in the long jump or high jump if our parents had decided to pay any attention to her abilities. Parent-teacher night after parent-teacher night, whenever anyone had any praise for my achievements my father always belittled it by remarking: "I shall see how he is really doing in Form Five when the real assessment begins."

Then, having thrown 'Form Five' in my face for so many years, when I reached the fourth form (Year Ten) my father started to worry about my future and, believing that I did not have any skills or abilities, tried to prevent me from having the opportunity of doing Form Five. He wanted us all to learn a trade and to eschew all abstract intellectual activity (unless it bore relation to religious dogma). When I reached the age of fifteen my father took me to the army and spoke to an army captain whose parents were Greek. My father wanted me to join the army in order to be trained in an apprenticeship. He believed that the army would teach me all I needed to live a good life. He did not believe that people needed a great deal of knowledge and education. A hardy, practical man, he was not impressed by my writing plays and acting in them at school.

Luckily for me he never objected to my studying Arabic at the Saturday School of Modern Languages. Other Greeks would have made a big fuss that their son was studying the language of the Enemy, but my father never raised any objections. He used to defend my decision.

My teachers always played a positive role in my life. They were very encouraging and gave me the affection I lacked. When I started Arabic at the Princes Hill High School Campus in 1979 I met Emad Moussa (a student of Dr Howes and now a member of Learningguild). He took me under his wing and treated me as his son. It was Emad who listened to my problems attentively and tried to guide me in the right direction. He gave me what my biological father could never have given me: he taught me that one could be a man and an intellectual and love the arts and writing. When I told Emad of plans to put me in the army he was in quiet thought for over forty-five minutes. I was touched. I do not think that anyone else has taken that much time over what I should do. I thank God that Emad was there. He insisted that I must do my HSC. He said that he thought that it was a mistake to throw away education and that, after finishing HSC, if I still wanted to go into the army, then I still could. The weight of his logical argument assisted my mother and me to convince my father that I should do my HSC.

I was successful in it and then very successful as an Arts student at the University of Melbourne. I majored in Modern Greek and standard Arabic, and took English for two years. I also studied beginner's Italian, which was of enormous benefit in my later learning of Portuguese and Spanish. In my first year I took two units, the Epistemology of Plato and Ethics, which made up Philosophy 1B. I loved my years of academic learning. I excelled and my mother once said to me "The more your father has tried to stand in your way the more successful you have become."

It is a pity that when I reached University, Emad was no longer the tutor for Arabic. He did continue to guide my development and it was on his advice that I studied philosophy in my first year. Teachers had such an effulgently positive influence on my

life ─ they were the reason that I survived ─ and so I decided that I wanted to be a secondary school teacher.

While I was successful academically I still carried within me psychological scars and debilitating insecurities from the verbal abuse of my upbringing. While I was dealing only with books, exams, theories and essays, I was able to cope. Once I had to go and face a classroom of children, all my psychological imbalances resurfaced and it took me three years to complete my Diploma of Education. Luckily I did complete it, and I did do some teaching for a while.

As Eva Jones pointed out at the end of my talk, the fact that I am even now still living with my parents means that we have come to an understanding. My relationship with my parents has improved markedly in recent years. They have accepted my passionate love of literature, languages and music. I learned in 1991 from a distant relative living in Athens that I am the child my father is most proud of.

I am very lucky that my parents have stood by me in the hard times when I could not manage to find another teaching job in the 1990s. They feel an immense pride in the caring work I do as an interpreter at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. They are assisting me in my present efforts to purchase a modest home.

My upbringing has taught me some valuable things. It has given me very strict discipline. My father taught me that courtesy and respect for older people was of inestimable importance. Never a jingoistic nationalist, but a socialist and opposed to any racism, he taught me not to judge people by their colour or nationality, but to take and accept them for what they are.

I think my experience of emotional cruelty has given me a deeper wisdom: an ability to recognise suffering and emotional need in others and to assist them to bear and overcome their crises. So, all in all, my upbringing has not been entirely negative.

Despite the hurts and shortcomings I must admit that I would never have had the opportunity to learn my languages if my parents had not done me the kindness of permitting me to do nothing but study all those years. I am grateful to them and I understand now how it is that children whose parents were abusive can replicate this behaviour when they become parents themselves. They are not familiar with ways of kindness, patience, fairness, encouragement. Yet those are the ways we all need to find and follow, as I realise more and more in my work as an interpreter and in other dealings with people.

Stratos has given us a memorable account, with a surprisingly happy ending, of a life in which both discouragement and encouragement were crucial factors. It would be good to have other autobiographical or biographical writing of this kind in *Learningguild Letter*, from our members and others, and also references to relevant books and articles.

JH

Tutoring in the Northern Territory

BARBARA BEAUMONT, *for many years a primary teacher, spoke to the Friday-evening group on August 19th about her experience, over six weeks earlier in the year, as a tutor with VISE (Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education). Invited to give us a written counterpart to her talk, she did so in two forms, offering me the choice between them. I think the reader will be glad to have both, for they complement each other in describing a situation of which most of us know very little. How good it is to read a cooperative and thoughtful teacher's description of his or her work.*

JH

A day in the life of a VISE tutor

It's still dark when my alarm rings at 6.30. Struggling into wakefulness, I switch on my light and put on my headphones so that I can listen to the news on the only station my radio receives, the local Aboriginal one.

Dawn is breaking as I head over to the kitchen for breakfast. I ignore the selection of eggs, bacon and sausage in the *bain marie* and take my usual breakfast of cereal and toast. It's UHT milk and white bread, but never mind. The station workers have already finished their breakfast and departed so there's just me, Cookie and Annie, the all-rounder, who's just off to feed the poddy calves. (I'm not using actual names.)

I've got used to the early start to the day. It's so that we can get in half an hour of Phys Ed before the heat gets too oppressive. Joshua is 10 and Kate 8. We meet at 7.30 on the little patch of concrete in front of the caravan that is our classroom. The low morning sun casts shade, so we start our session here with our daily stretches. Then there are activities on a weekly roster. Today it's batting skills using cricket bats. Kate's batting is not too strong and although I've given her extra sessions some evenings, there's still a chance she will get the grumps if she gets out too often or doesn't get many runs. Happily she hits the ball more consistently and scores better than the previous week, so the session ends happily.

Next I have an hour for literacy with Joshua alone while Kate does maths with her mother, Ellie. Joshua has fallen way behind with literacy and Ellie and I have agreed that an hour of individual work, away from the judgemental eye of his sister, will enable him to let down the barriers. It seems to be working well. We are loosely following a program called "Bridges", which is for students in the upper years of primary school. My version of it goes something like this. We start with his basic "readers", rereading familiar ones and tackling a new one, then move on to some word study, write a couple of sentences based on the book he's read and finish with some serial reading – my reading to him an age-appropriate text. This is to keep him in touch with what other kids of his age are reading as well as demonstrate the value of being able to read. The problem with his "readers" is that those he is able to read are mainly written for younger children. Fortunately his teacher has made a pretty good selection for him including folk tales and non-fiction books, both of which he relates to.

The hour whizzes past. It's time to dash over to the house for a two-way radio program from Katherine School of the Air, which is the children's school and provides all their lessons. Today it's choir, which should be more "hands-on" than yesterday's interesting but rather long assembly on the topic of NAIDOC, which entailed a lot of sustained listening. (NAIDOC is the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee, and the term 'NAIDOC week' is widely used. It refers to a week in July when the survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and their culture is celebrated. There is a website www.naidoc.org.au.) Joshua and Kate both enjoy singing and are quite uninhibited about singing over the air. If I can manage to prevent them squabbling over the microphone, we should have an enjoyable half-hour. It's impossible to resist the enthusiasm of the teacher, who's an excellent singer and guitarist.

Half an hour to go before our first break – just time to fit in our daily spelling and a little handwriting. It's great to be able to compile individual spelling lists that are exactly tailored to the children's needs. The children work on their lists each day until Friday, which will be test day. Last week they both got all their words right, so they are enthused by success.

At 10.00 the gong sounds and we head over to the kitchen for "Smoko". This is more a light meal than a snack. Joshua tucks in to a good helping of beef stew and potatoes while Kate nibbles at some fruit salad. It's a very social occasion as everyone who's working near enough comes in for this meal.

At 10.30 Joshua goes over to the house for maths with Ellie. Ellie feels more confident with the maths than with the literacy. The school provides a series of workbooks for the children to follow, a very comprehensive tutor's guide and a kit containing all the equipment that will be required. Kate and I head to the caravan for literacy. Kate is mad on horse books, but I've had enough of them, so a couple of days ago I introduced her to a Roald Dahl book, which she is really enjoying. She's an excellent reader, but we find plenty to work on with spelling, punctuation, paragraphing etc.

In the last hour before lunch we start some work for one of our IDL (Internet Delivered Learning) programs later in the week. Our subject is early Australian History and Literature, and today we have to imagine we are a ship's captain on a voyage of exploration and write the ship's log for a day. We revise and discuss the ideas that were presented in last week's program before settling down to a solid half-hour of writing. At first Joshua was appalled at the idea of writing for such a length of time and produced very little, but now he is growing in confidence and produces a respectable amount. He has great ideas and it's a joy to see him more and more able to set them down on paper for himself.

Lunch is a casual affair. Ready-made sandwiches are set out for us and there's the usual cake and fruit. I grab mine and bring it back to the caravan to eat while I complete my preparation for the afternoon. As we have an hour's break, there's enough time to pop over to the house and do a few chores before afternoon school.

We return to the caravan and continue with our Science and Social Education unit. This is a "paper-based" unit, which means that there's a booklet to follow. It's all about energy production, mining and the effect of wheat farming on the water table. It's

not exactly inspiring any of us but we chip away at it a little at a time. I have to do lots of "chalk and talk", including drawing, to try to explain some of the ideas in the unit. Fortunately the kids really respond to my drawings and then do much better ones themselves! I have also found some internet sites that are relevant, so I give them turns on the computer while the other work is completed.

At last it's time for IDL (Interactive Distance Learning), a computer-based program which we have three times a week. The lesson is delivered "live" so that the kids are able to see their teachers on the screen, hear them, talk to them or send brief email messages. Today's program is part of The Arts learning area and we are going to look at dance. I have been wondering how the teachers will tackle this. They start by showing us some videos of dance from different cultures. The huge benefit of the computer over the radio is that the teachers are able to use visual material in their lessons. The children are invited to call in with their responses to the teacher's questions and I am agreeably surprised at the perceptiveness of their answers. Next we brainstorm some moves that can be included in a dance. Some children who are visiting the studio today demonstrate for us. Finally we are given our homework. We have to choose our own music and create a dance sequence based on some of the moves we have brainstormed. That's good – we can incorporate it into the Phys Ed session on Thursday, our day for doing dance.

At the end of the program, we have a quick tidy up and the day is over. There's no homework as the kids have already had a long day in class. I know Kate will read in bed for an hour or so and I know Joshua won't even open a book. He's more interested in the outdoor life and the animals on the station. His greatest joy is to go mustering with the stock camp.

I haven't managed to fit in serial reading today, which is a shame as we all enjoy it. I make a mental note that we must give it a high priority tomorrow. There is so much to do that it's a challenge to fit everything in, but planning the learning of two children is immensely satisfying. I stay in the caravan for a while, planning for the next couple of days, and then turn my attention to my own emails. I am lucky to have sole use of the school computer after hours. I do as much as I can as tomorrow we are going into town straight after class so that Joshua can play football, and then again the next day for Kate to do Scottish dancing. This involves a drive of an hour and a half each way. It's great for them to be able to socialise with other kids but it means a long time in the car and late nights.

The day's work over, I retire to the verandah for an hour or so of reading. It's cool enough to be pleasant outside now and the sunsets are spectacular. Then, wondering which variation of beef we will be having tonight, it's over to the kitchen one more time for dinner, before it's time to retire to my room for diary writing, studying Italian and more reading. Before I take my shower, I go into my bathroom armed with a bucket and a towel to catch any frogs that are in there (usually two or three) and deposit them outside.

At the early hour of 10 o'clock, another day is over and it's time for bed.

Teachers, tutors, children and equipment

As children in the Australian outback often live hundreds of kilometres from the nearest school, their education is provided through Schools of the Air, which deliver education through a number of media, traditionally the radio and the postal service and more recently computers and the Internet.

The children I have called Joshua and Kate receive their education through the Katherine School of the Air (KSA). Every child in KSA is in a "class" and has a class teacher. This teacher, based at Katherine, is responsible for setting an individual educational program for each child and monitoring progress. Children are grouped into classes consisting of two year-levels – Grades Prep/1, 2/3, 4/5 and 6/7.

In addition to the teacher at Katherine, each child has a "home tutor" responsible for the day-to-day delivery of the program. In many cases this is the mother, although some families employ a "governess", often a university student with no formal qualifications. It was this role of home tutor that I took on. Plenty of support is made available to the home tutors in the form of explanatory material, telephone contact with the teacher and occasional seminars. Nevertheless, for many families it is a daunting task to oversee their children's education and they worry whether they are doing a good job. As well as the responsibilities of the school room, many mothers have other responsibilities, which may include pre-schoolers to supervise. On the station where I stayed, the mother's other duties included office work and supervision of domestic staff (cook, cleaners and gardener) as well as the normal domestic duties of running a home.

KSA bills itself as "the greatest classroom in the world". It covers an area of approximately 800,000 square km, which is more than three times the size of the United Kingdom or New Zealand. The area is divided into regions, and teachers are responsible for a class of approximately fifteen students within their region. Despite being hundreds of kilometres apart, children in the same class have the opportunity to meet their teachers and each other four times a year. They come from all socio-economic strata and some are indigenous.

In April there is a "Mini School", when children, home tutors and teachers from a geographical area come together in a central location for a week-long program. Although this includes school work, it has a strong social focus and there are excursions and a drama production. A more formal "In School" is held in Katherine at mid-year for all the children enrolled in KSA. This is a week of regular school, held in the premises of one of the local schools during their vacation. For most of the children it is their only opportunity to experience such aspects of school life as a day regulated by the school bell, sitting still for a period of time and putting their hand up to speak, not to mention being one member of a sizeable class. In August or September a camp is held, normally at the Batchelor Outdoor Education Centre (approximately 100km south of Darwin), which gives children, tutors, parents and teachers further opportunities to interact during a program of crafts and outdoor pursuits. To finish the year there is "Swim School" in Katherine, with swimming lessons every day and a Christmas concert at the end of the week.

Thus everyone has several opportunities a year to get to know each other. Friendships are formed and when the children use their two-way radio or computers they know exactly who they are speaking to.

The children are driven to these gatherings, usually by their mother, or perhaps by the governess or home tutor. For the women, it is a great opportunity to enjoy some social life with their peers. During these gatherings there are seminars to assist the home tutors in their role of on-the-ground supervisor of the classroom.

Attendance at the schools and camp is not compulsory. My children were lucky to have a family that took them to all four, but other families may not be in a position to do so.

As well as attending the schools and camp, each teacher does a yearly "patrol" visit to each child in his or her class. For the more remote visits, which necessitate travelling hundreds of kilometres by four-wheel-drive across rugged countryside, the teachers generally travel in pairs and visit several families in one trip, staying overnight with each family. The teacher's visit is an event of great excitement for the children, and for the teacher an opportunity to become familiar with the family, the children and the conditions under which they study.

The children I supervised had a very well equipped classroom in an old caravan. As well as the usual classroom furnishings of children's desks, teacher's desk and whiteboard, it had a computer linked to the Internet by satellite and, most important, an air-conditioner. With temperature reaching the mid-thirties every day, we certainly appreciated it. Some less fortunate children have only a corner of a verandah or in some cases have to take their schoolwork with them on the stock camp.

Like children all over Australia, the KSA children study the seven learning areas of English, Maths, Science, Social & Environmental Education, Physical Education, The Arts and Technology. There was no provision in KSA for learning another language (although children just over the border in WA were learning Indonesian). English was well catered for with daily writing, spelling and reading. A good range of reading materials and library books was sent out through the post, arriving by plane on a weekly basis. In addition to the daily writing, a number of the other subjects had a substantial written component. For their daily maths, the children worked their way through a comprehensive series of workbooks, each accompanied by a tutor's instruction book. The family was also provided with a kit containing all necessary materials.

The two-way radio, by which three half-hour lessons a week were delivered, was not in the classroom but in a shady corner of a meshed-in verandah. Monday was Assembly, Tuesday was Library and Wednesday was Choir, the latter two with specialist teachers who brought a high degree of expertise and enthusiasm to their lessons. A book introduced in a library session called "68 Teeth", about a crocodile and set on a cattle station, really inspired Joshua, who couldn't wait to get his hands on it. We found ourselves singing songs we had learnt in choir on some of our long car journeys.

The computer, with its broadband satellite connection to the Internet, enabled the children to have some subjects, in our case Social Education and the Arts, delivered to them by Interactive Distance Learning (IDL) in the way I have described. IDL is in its

third year of a three-year trial and it was interesting to see the young KSA teachers coming to grips with the technology. Through their experience with radio, the teachers were already skilled at challenging the children to think and contribute their ideas to the lesson. IDL enables them to enhance the children's learning by showing slides and video clips and writing on a whiteboard. Slight drawbacks were the time-delays experienced when one party spoke to another and the fact that the children were not always able to hear what another child said, so that the teacher had to repeat it. As the children were accustomed to both these features from their use of the radio, they were not bothered by them. They had a scanner and were required to submit their follow-up work online, which enabled them to see each other's work on the computer screen. They were also able to send emails to each other and their teachers. Through using IDL, they greatly develop their computer skills and are encouraged to use the World Wide Web for research.

VISE tutors are mainly retired teachers. The tutor normally spends six weeks with a family. In return, the family pays return transport and provides room and board. There is a careful screening process including a police check. Some VISE tutors travel with their partner (who also has to go through the screening process) in a caravan and make their six weeks part of a longer trip, but many tutors travel singly. Accommodation ranges "from the sublime to the gorblimey" as the VISE tutor's notes describe it. The tutor must be prepared to face challenges, in particular fitting in tactfully to the family situation and dealing with the isolation of the bush. I was lucky in that the family travelled to the nearby town twice a week (a mere hour and a half's drive each way!) for the activities I have mentioned. In addition we spent a couple of whole weekends in town, once for a rodeo and once when the father had to attend a meeting.

For me it was a most worthwhile experience. I saw a part of the country that I had not visited before, experienced a way of life that I would never otherwise encounter, met many interesting and friendly people, and above all gained great satisfaction from seeing the children make real progress in their learning.

I have put in the Learningguild Library a book called *Breakthrough*, edited by Ronald Goldman and published in 1968, in which people who had been disadvantaged as children but reached high levels of education look back on their early years. G.Henton Davies, who became a Baptist minister, a noted Hebrew scholar, and Principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford, writes (p.45) of a Mr Richards who was his form-master in the primary school in Aberdare, South Wales:

> … to him I owe one enormous debt. He gave me a love of reading and of wide reading too. He, himself, was a superb reader, and our all too frequent request was 'Sir, please read to us'. I can still remember him, reading to us as a class, in the winter afternoons, sometimes as long as half an hour after normal school hours. We hung on his reading and on his interesting summaries of the dull bits in between. We were regaled with *The White Company* and the like, various poets, Norse Mythology, Dickens, Henty. That teacher in the Council school in Foundry Town had a great influence upon me. In later years no matter how specialized my reading had to become, I have clung to my conviction that I should always read as widely as possible.

JH

Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping Uprising

On August 5th **JACK GREGORY** *gave a second talk concerning China to the Friday-evening group. It is summarized in this article. An earlier contribution, "Clashing Civilizations? The West and China", appeared in* LgL *2.2002. Jack Gregory is Emeritus Professor of History at La Trobe University in Melbourne, and a member of Learningguild. His book* The West and China since 1500 *was published in 2003 by Palgrave Macmillan.*

Hong Xiuquan[1] was born in 1814 in a village near Canton. He was the youngest and brightest of three sons in a peasant family. The family put a good deal of its limited resources into giving Hong an education, in the hope that he would pass the Confucian-based civil service examinations held regularly by the Chinese government, and so win an official appointment. "To become an official and get rich" was a standard Chinese ambition, but not one easy to realize. To fail the examinations was far more common than to pass them, and Hong, who travelled down to Canton several times to join the candidates, had no success. Repeated failures made him feel very guilty towards his family, and in 1837 he had what we would call a nervous breakdown. He had visions or hallucinations in which, among several other remarkable incidents, he was eventually brought into the presence of a venerable old man with a long golden beard, seated on a high throne, who greeted him as a son. The old man complained that the world had become corrupted. "They take of my gifts and worship demons; they purposely rebel against me and arouse my anger. Do thou not imitate them." He gave Hong a special sword and urged him to return to the world and destroy the demons, who had penetrated Heaven itself. After purging Heaven and (to the irritation of his elder brother) resting for a time with his wife there, First Chief Moon, Hong returned rather reluctantly to earth, at the urging of the venerable old man who conferred on him the title "Heavenly King, Lord of the Kingly Way". Back on earth, Hong dashed wildly about his room, crying out "Slash the demons", and denied that he was a son of the family, which had to keep a close eye on him, lest he damage himself or others, until after some weeks he calmed down.

Not surprisingly, neither Hong nor anyone else knew what to make of all this, and things returned more or less to normal, though Hong appears to have had something of a personality change, gaining in confidence and authority. However, he returned to his Confucian studies, made a living of sorts for his earthly wife and child, and failed the exams once more. While not forgetting his visions, he did not try to act upon them. In 1843 a relative drew his attention to a pamphlet that had been thrust into his hands on one of his earlier exam expeditions, but had remained unread on his shelves since. Put together by a Chinese convert to Christianity named Liang, it consisted of extracts from the Bible, then gradually being translated by Protestant missionaries, plus some commentary by Liang. The sizeable pamphlet included the Old Testament stories of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but little of the New Testament save portion of the Book of Revelation ─ a heady mixture, which for Hong suddenly helped make sense of his visions. He became convinced that he had had an authentic revelatory experience, was indeed God's younger son entrusted with the tasks of destroying the earthly demons and updating the message carried in the Christian

Bible, of which he became an obsessive student as more and more of it became available. He began to persuade a few others of the truth of his revelations, and to attack what seemed to him evidence of "demons" at work in temples and other places. He again visited Canton, not to take the examinations but to make contact with an American Baptist missionary there who, however, refused to baptize him. Having come to believe in his vision, he hardly needed such confirmation. His circle of followers grew, not so much in his local area as further off in the hinterland of Southern China, and by 1849 he was ready to challenge the ruling Manchu (Qing) dynasty and proclaim his own "Taiping Tienkuo" (Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace).

Over the next fifteen years Hong led ─ more as a religious and political than as a military commander ─ a movement which seriously challenged not just the ruling dynasty but also the long-established Confucian orthodoxy of China, which Hong condemned as part of the corruption he had been sent from heaven to purge. By 1853, after growing in numbers in South China, his followers had swept northward to gain control of much of the central and lower Yangtze valley, which included some of the richest and most populous parts of the empire. Nanking, the second city of that empire, was captured and renamed Tienjing, Heavenly Capital. Taiping armies then advanced further north, approaching Peking itself. In 1854 it seemed quite possible that the two-hundred-year-old Manchu dynasty, which at that time was also under increasing pressure from Western powers seeking to open up China to their traders and missionaries, would be replaced by a quasi-Christian dynasty led by a Chinese claiming to be God's younger son. Westerners, including the missionaries, were uncertain how to react to this possibility, but many were very hopeful about it. One wrote: "As a missionary, when I came to China, I felt all around the gloom of midnight darkness. Now the clouds are breaking, and though I know not what the day may bring I hail the glimmering dawn."

The Taiping uprising proved not to be any new dawn for China. That did not come for at least another hundred painful years. But for the next ten years the Taiping did continue to control much of central China, and about 1860 were greatly expanding their power, so much so that, when the ruling dynasty was humiliated by the West in the second Opium War (1856-60), it again seemed possible that they might triumph overall. But when in 1862 they attempted to capture Shanghai, Western forces intervened to prevent them, and they were forced back until, in mid-1864, Nanking was recaptured, though by Chinese, not Western-led, forces. Hong himself had died a few months earlier, still trying to assure his followers that his heavenly father, who had called him back, would preserve them. But they were savagely and comprehensively destroyed, and the Taiping movement disappeared as a religious and military force, though the memory of it long inspired anti-Manchu nationalists such as Sun Yat-sen and Mao, though not Chiang Kai-shek.

Was it at all possible that Hong's visions could somehow have been more fully realized, that he and his religious movement could, by force of arms, have established a new political order over a wide area? Something very like that had been achieved in 7th-century Arabia when Muhammad had his vision of an archangel bringing him instructions direct from God on how the world should be ordered. Having such visions and claiming divine authority for them is by no means uncommon in human history, and continues to this day. (The Turk who attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II is a current example.) But few gain the following and have the success that Muhammad and, if only for a time, Hong did. Why, in the end, was Hong a kind of Muhammad *manqué*?

For the true believer in Muhammad, of course, the answer is simple ─ it was God's will, and even to ask such a question is a kind of heresy. When Gibbon asked it about the success of Christianity in the later Roman Empire, excusing himself tongue-in-cheek for seeking what he called "the secondary causes" of that success, some of his readers were so offended that they ripped the offending chapter (15) out of their copies of his great work. But for the sceptical-minded historian such as myself, it seems reasonable to ask why Hong failed while an earlier similar visionary had had such success.

Anything like a Gibbon-style full answer, exploring the parallels as well as the contrasts between Hong and Muhammad, would require much more space than is available here, but the short answer is that, whatever the force of his visions, Hong's occurred in a very different society from Muhammad's. Whatever its problems, the 19th-century China that Hong challenged was a far more sophisticated, integrated society than the 7th-century Arabia faced by Muhammad. Moreover, the foreign forces Muhammad's followers soon encountered, on the edge of the Byzantine empire and in Iran, were far weaker than the Western ones forces the Taiping eventually ran up against. Both the internal and the external forces facing Hong and his followers were far greater than those facing Muhammad and his followers.

The three main monotheistic religions claiming directly-inspired divine origins all emerged out of Middle Eastern societies in which tribal traditions were very strong, though Christianity and Islam quickly universalised their messages. What would the world religious landscape of today look like had a fourth religion that claimed divine inspiration and a holy book established itself firmly and widely in 19th-century China, a great empire being forced at that time by the powerful West to adapt to modernity? Had "God's Chinese Son" and his followers succeeded in establishing control over that empire, or even a great part of it, as up to 1862-3 they seemed capable of doing, they might have become a challenging alternative to the older monotheistic religions, especially to Christianity's faith in "God's only-begotten Son" and Islam's claim that Muhammad was the last of the prophets. But after a great struggle China remained within its own varied and diffuse religious tradition, in which faith in divine revelation had little or no place. It still remains there, although Chinese Christian churches unconnected with Taiping are making some headway there now, along with other non-visionary faiths such as Buddhism and Taoism, not to mention new movements such as Falun Gong.

There are many ways of trying to define mankind's place between Heaven and Earth. Hong's was just one of them which for a time seemed to have great potential, only to produce another of the great 'What if' questions history can pose.[2]

NOTES

1. In the old style, Hung Hsiu-ch'uan.

2. The fullest biography of Hong, entitled *God's Chinese Son*, is by Jonathan Spence (Harper Collins 1996).

Francis Kilvert and his Diary

At the Friday-evening meeting on December 2nd, **MICHAEL HOWES** *invited those present to join in reading extracts from this diary and told us, as he does here, of Kilvert himself. Much of Michael's work has been, and continues to be, writing about Victoria's national parks. He also maintains wide interests in history and geography, both of which he studied at the University of Melbourne.*

> The trees blazed with the diamonds of the melting hoar frost. The wet village roads shone like silver below, and the market folk thronged past the Vicarage and School. A railway engine shot up a bright white jet of steam over the bank from Hay station, the oaks were still tawny green and glittering with diamond dews.
>
> (Thursday 17 November 1870)

Diaries from the past can give fascinating insights into people's lives and thoughts in other times and places. They add a personal perspective to the bare objective facts of political, social and economic history. They enable us to compare our lives with those of the past.

Britain has produced many famous diarists, like Samuel Pepys in the 17th century and Parson Woodforde in the 18th. The actress Fanny Burney, and Dorothy Wordsworth, sister of the poet William, also left illuminating letters and diaries.

Here in Victoria we have *The Diary of a Welsh Swagman*, written between about 1865 and 1890 and giving us a detailed picture of farming life and work in the colony from a Welsh migrant's perspective. It is the subject of a Learningguild discussion in February 2006.

Francis Kilvert, born in 1840, was an obscure English country parson who died when he was only 39. Yet thousands of people today read and love his Diary, written between 1870 and 1879, because of passages like the above that enable us to picture a scene in our mind's eye, hear the sounds the writer heard and feel his emotions. He has the knack of making you see and feel vividly what he is describing.

Analysing the extract above we can begin to see how he does this through the use of tremendously lively and strong words. The trees weren't just shiny: they *blazed* like diamonds. The railway engine didn't simply let off steam: it *shot up a bright white jet of steam*. He uses vivid verbs and exact adjectives to create a picture that could be painted; he could be described as an Impressionist who used words instead of a brush.

He believed that even such an uneventful life as his deserved to be recorded, and perhaps he kept his diary partly to while away the lonely bachelor evenings. He was an unmarried clergyman and so there were few in the village with whom he could acceptably mix.

How did my family and I, in far-off Australia, come to hear about Kilvert and his diary? My brothers and I were born in England, and like most migrants retain a strong

relationship with our "mother country". With a particular interest in British history and geography, I was the sort of person the diary would be likely to appeal to.

My sister-in-law Philippa was studying in Oxford in the early 1980s and sent her mother a copy of the Penguin edition of *Kilvert's Diary*. (The Diary had been the subject of a BBC TV series a year or two earlier and was becoming more widely known.) My wife Dorothy and I picked the book up and became fascinated by both the written entries and the accompanying maps, one of the area around Hay-on-Wye on the border between England and Wales, and the other of the Chippenham district in Wiltshire in western England, where Kilvert's father was a vicar.

The map of the borderland was particularly engaging with its mixture of English and Welsh placenames (e.g. Middlewood, Dorstone and Peterchurch; Wern-y-pentre, Bryngwyn and Llanigon) and the rivers, farms and old railway lines shown.

Later in the 80s I planned a year's work exchange to a national park in Britain, and by chance the park selected was the Brecon Beacons, an area that takes in the Kilvert country of Hay and Clyro. So in 1990-91 my counterpart Rosy White worked in my job with the Department of Conservation in Melbourne while I filled her information position in Brecon.

It was a formative time for the whole family as we got to know the local area and people and some of the culture, language and history. We visited several of the places that Kilvert mentions in his Diary, though work and family commitments didn't allow us to explore them thoroughly or join the Kilvert Society (formed in 1948) in its meetings, walks and other activities.

There was another curious family connection. On our return to Australia I found that my brother John had a book titled *After Kilvert*, written by A.L. Le Quesne (pronounced 'Cain'), who happened to be married to the sister of John's best man! Le Quesne, an Englishman, "discovered" *Kilvert's Diary* in Adelaide when he was working in Australia in the late 1950s. Having returned to Britain, he had the opportunity after some years to buy the very house in Clyro near Hay-on-Wye in which Kilvert had lived, and he wrote a most interesting account of his and his family's activities in 1970, exactly 100 years after Kilvert began his diary.

In his book Le Quesne contrasts the life, beliefs and behaviour of Kilvert's time with those of his own. For instance, in Kilvert's day there were (of course) no cars; people travelled by train, and transport was "public but relaxed" rather than "private but stressful". (Kilvert was not wealthy enough to keep a horse, so visited his parishioners, some of them very poor, on foot. He was a great walker.) Nostalgia – a love of past times and a feeling that they were better than the present – is widespread today, whereas in *Kilvert's Diary* there is no evidence of it at all.

In discussing the changes in attitudes to and treatment of disease, Le Quesne notes how in Kilvert's time death, of the young as well as the old, was commonplace, and disease was something to be endured. Today we believe that illness can be controlled and cured, and "when the young die … it is a scandal to us". But, he adds, "They had disease and death within a stable historical order, where we have health within a total

historical uncertainty. … it has become impossible to imagine our world a hundred years hence."

Even on a more mundane level there are fascinating contrasts. Walking in the country today, for example, would almost always involve carrying and consulting a map. Kilvert never mentions maps, though he often went on long walks, and sometimes got lost. He either accepted this and went a different way, or asked someone he met in a house or field for directions. There were far more people in the countryside than there are today. And so the contrasts continue: in social classes, attitudes to poverty, the place of the church in society, attitudes to art, and much more. The 20th century was a time of great change.

> I had not been long in the house when Hannah's beautiful seven year old child Carrie gradually stole up to me and nestled close in my arms. … Then came the old, old story, the sweet confession as old as human hearts, "I do love you so. Do you love me?" "Yes", said the child, lovingly clinging still closer with fresh caresses and endearments. … I was in heaven.
>
> (Wednesday 23 August 1871)

Kilvert didn't love and describe only the countryside: he loved girls, and describes many of them in his Diary. In our post-Freud world we find it hard to believe that his thoughts about young girls, and relationships with them, as described in the Diary, could be asexual. Yet in his time there was apparently no suspicion, no fear of abuse – Kilvert was evidently loved by all and was very popular with girls and women. Have we become **too** suspicious today of showing affection to children, and accepting it from them?

Sadly, despite his love of children, Kilvert was not to have any of his own. He had several unsuccessful love affairs, being prevented from marrying by his lack of money and "prospects" and relatively lowly social position, and perhaps by his somewhat passive, unassertive personality. At last he found the right person, Elizabeth Anne Rowland, and married her in August 1879 – only to die a month later from peritonitis, a cure for which, by means of appendix operations, was just a few years in the future. How sad his wife's lot was: a month's marriage and 32 years as a widow. She destroyed large parts of the Diary, apparently feeling they were too personal, so what we have today is only a fraction of the original.

But what a treasure that still is! I could write much more about *Kilvert's Diary*, but perhaps the best thing I can do is to encourage readers to discover it for themselves. To find out more about Kilvert and his country, websites may be consulted such as www.literaryheritage.org.uk, www.churchinwales.org.uk and www.clyro.co.uk Key 'Kilvert' into Google and more sites will appear. There is the biography *Francis Kilvert* by David Lockwood (1990).

His tomb bears the inscription 'He being dead yet speaketh', a remarkably prophetic statement that will continue to be true as new people come to know the sensitive, modest, lively, sociable and endearing Rev. Francis Kilvert.

Jorge Gil

His friend **VIGA ROGINSKI**, *a fellow-member of Learningguild, writes this tribute.*

We remember Jorge as he was at Learningguild meetings and events – a quiet, attentive listener and thinker, always very interested in other people.

Jorge Costa Santos Gil was born in Lisbon, Portugal, on the 9th of October 1952. He came to Australia with his family about sixteen years ago. He was a very proud father of two daughters, now married, and grandfather of Nicole, who is 2. He was so excited, even before Nicole was born, that each time he went shopping he would also purchase baby singlets, booties and jumpers. His parents, brother and two sisters live with their families in Portugal, and the last time he went to visit them was in 2003. He was very good in keeping in touch, regularly phoning, writing letters and sending audiotaped messages. Like most Portugese he was Catholic, with a special fervour for the Madonna of Fatima. Through the church he was active in many committees, visited prisoners, and distributed meals to homeless people.

Jorge worked as an accountant at Everest Foods, a company manufacturing gourmet frozen pasta and ice cream: the beautiful Bacci, Tartuffo and gelati. He was in charge of credit accounts, and maintained the sensitivity and tact that make for good relationships.

The cancer which, two years ago, he was found to have Jorge fought by different means: chemotherapy that required hospitalization, reiki, and body electronics. He always returned to work very quickly after each chemotherapy treatment, and the company was very flexible and supportive to the end. He died on the 8th of November 2005.

Jorge loved life, people and chocolates. Always on the go, with so many interests: bushwalking, travelling, history, architecture, movies, reading, music, dancing (he took dancing lessons), and of course soccer. One of his last visits was to Santiago de Compostela, a medieval town five hours' drive from Lisbon and said to be the burial place of St James. He was charmed by the narrow streets and sacred music at the Cathedral. He was always very positive, had so many projects and plans. Early in 2003 he said it would be a year of many changes and bought a tent with the intention of camping in the Australian bush. Later that year he became ill and never used his tent.

In his love of people, Jorge was very understanding and supportive. Although his friends came from many walks of life, he always managed to keep in touch. During each stay at hospital, as always very humble and respectful, with quiet jokes he befriended more and more medical staff. He was a very good listener. My next-door-neighbour is a very quiet, reserved man, yet with Jorge he had an animated discussion about health, fishing and army service (Jorge was in the air force). Jorge was very reliable, would not break a promise, and was always ready to help. He was very punctual: in fact he liked to arrive at least ten minutes before time. Those minutes could make quite a difference.

Now he is gone. A friend of mine and his said "A beautiful soul went home."

WHAT'S A GOOD INTRODUCTION TO … *ECONOMICS?*

DR JOHN WILLIAMS, *a philosopher much concerned with principles of economics and politics, and a member of Learningguild, addressed the Friday-evening group on September 2nd on the wide-ranging work of Steven D. Levitt, whose book* Freakonomics *has been a best-seller. Here he offers that book as an introduction to economics itself.*

Who would have guessed that a volume written by an economist would head *The New York Times*'s list of best-selling non-fiction books for some six months? Has not economics long been designated "the dismal science"?[1]

Yet *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, by the economist Steven D. Levitt and the economic journalist Stephen J. Dubner, published by William Morrow in New York, and already translated into eighteen languages, proved to be one of the world's best-selling works of non-fiction published in 2005. It is also, I suggest, an admirable (albeit off-beat) introduction to the discipline of economics.

Steven Levitt's academic stature is singularly impressive. A Harvard graduate who completed his Ph.D. at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he was when a mere 24 years of age awarded the John Bates Clark Medal, an award given every two years to the most able American economist under 40 years of age. He accepted a tenured professorship at Chicago University, where he was subsequently appointed director of the newly created Gary Becker Research Centre. (Becker, a winner of the same medal and

later of the Nobel Prize in Economics, pioneered the application of "the economic way of thinking" to human relationships and interactions not hitherto regarded as falling within the province of economists.)

The popularity of *Freakonomics* is no doubt to be ascribed to the quirky questions Levitt asks and seeks to answer. Why do crack dealers live at home with their mothers? Do real estate agents seek the best deal for their clients? Is the unexpected fall in the US crime-rate during the 1990s ─ most criminologists and other sociologists had in the mid- to late-1980s predicted an exponential increase in that rate during the coming decade ─ best explained by the US Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v Wade* which legalized abortion? Do schoolteachers cheat and Sumo wrestlers "throw" matches?

Yet the book can serve as an admirable introduction to the discipline of economics, because it focuses on human beings making choices as they seek to realize their diverse visions of "the good life". Economics is **not** about money or such abstractions as a nation's Gross Domestic Product or the phenomena of involuntary unemployment and inflation. Rather, it is about human beings valuing and purposively acting in order to satisfy their wants and desires, balancing costs and responding to incentives.

The primary premise of economics is that people's behaviour in the main is rational. Individuals and sets of individuals typically make eminently rational choices given available alternatives, their own tastes and values, and such information as they possess. Economists do not pretend that everyone's crazy Uncle Fred is rational, but they do argue that for the most part we human beings make rational choices influenced by incentives.

Unfortunately, the further one progresses in economics, the more the human person seems to disappear from view, obscured behind an increasingly complex mass of mathematical models and equations. Dr Levitt restores the valuing and rationally acting human being to the centre of the economic stage, and so introduces his readers to what one might call the "basics" of economics.

What are they? Typical are the propositions expressed in these statements. People typically behave rationally. The "cost" of a given choice is the alternative choice forgone (the "cost" of my attending a performance of *The Lion King* is forgoing my "next-best" valued action, say my purchasing three DVDs). People respond to incentives. Time and information are economic ─ that is, scarce ─ goods. If two people freely choose to exchange goods and services, each party to the exchange surrenders what he or she values less in order to acquire what he or she values more. These propositions are all but obvious; indeed some economists once claimed, mistakenly, that the basic premises of economics were self-evident, were synthetic *a priori* truths.

Levitt seeks to answer his oddball questions by reference to one or more of these disarmingly simple propositions. For example, he demonstrates that the marginal increase in real estate commissions does not constitute an adequate incentive for a real estate agent to invest additional time and effort in order to secure the highest price for his or her clients. He argues that crack dealers live with their mothers because the profit margin in dealing crack is, for street dealers, surprisingly low, too low to enable such a person to afford alternative accommodation.

In his book's most controversial chapter, that ascribing the dramatic fall of the crime rate during the 1990s in major US cities to the legalization of abortion in 1973, Levitt repeatedly demonstrates that documenting a correlation between events is insufficient to establish a causal relation between the events. That is all but a cliché in the writings of most so-called "classical economists".

The dramatic decrease during the 1990s of the crime rate in many major US cities was, as many thinkers had noted, preceded or accompanied by improved policing, the ebbing of the crack cocaine trade or the "zero tolerance" policing policies initiated during the 1990s in New York City and elsewhere. Levitt's arguments to the effect that these correlations do not in each case establish a causal relationship superbly illustrate not simply "the economic way of thinking" but "clear thinking" as such. No less instructive is his meticulous analysis of extensive and detailed statistical data, an analysis leading to his conclusion that the 1973 US Supreme Court Decision legalizing abortion, was – of course unintentionally ─ the cause of a temporally distant state of affairs crying out for explanation.

He writes:

> The most dramatic effect of legalized abortion …, [an effect which] would take years to reveal itself, was its impact on crime. In the early 1990s, just as the first cohort of children born after *Roe v Wade* was hitting its late teen years ─ the years during which young males enter their criminal prime ─ the rate of crime began to fall. What this cohort was missing, of course, were the children who stood the greatest chance of becoming criminals.

Simply, given legalized abortion, fewer children were born whose family situation rendered them "unwanted". Solid evidence obtains for asserting that the overwhelming majority of people repeatedly engaging in serial criminal acts (a) commenced their criminal careers during their late teens and (b) had been "unwanted".

Levitt's argument is carefully made and somewhat complex. This is not surprising, as he had made out his case in several academic papers published before the appearance of *Freakonomics* and had responded to the many and varied criticisms these papers received. His argument, and in particular his statistical analysis of an awesome collection of empirical data, withstood this barrage of criticisms.

Not surprisingly, Levitt was accused by some people of advocating eugenics. The accusation was outrageous. He was not concerned to proffer a prescription for curbing crime. Indeed he writes that "[m]orality represents the way that people would like the world of human action and interaction to work. … [E]conomics merely explores how that world in fact works."

Whilst he does not say it, that observation of Levitt suggests that men and women concerned with the foundations of a free and humane society would do well to maintain a dual orientation when considering the actions and interactions of human beings. For both economic analysis and ethical reflection begin with a single starting-point: the rational, valuing, choosing and acting person.[2]

NOTES

1. This expression was coined in 1849 by Thomas Carlyle, in an essay entitled “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question”, published in *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country.* It became more widely known and quoted after Carlyle in 1853 published a booklet entitled *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question,* an appallingly racist work. Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and not a few like-minded conservatives deplored “the dismal science”, i.e. classical economics, because its exponents maintained that all human beings, not just an aristocratic or racially specified elite, should be at liberty to formulate and peacefully strive to realize their own “visions of the good life”. See Levy, David M., *How the Dismal Science Got Its Name: Classical Economics and the Ur-Text of Racial Politics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001)

2. A reader moved by *Freakonomics* to delve more deeply into economics might find interesting as well as accessible what is fast becoming a “standard economics text” in US colleges: Paul T. Heynes’s *The Economic Way of Thinking,* 10th edition (New York: Prentice Hall, 2003). Valuable also as introductions to economics are Thomas Sowell's *Basic Economics: A Citizen’s Guide to the Economy* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) and *Applied Economics: Thinking Beyond Stage One* (New York: Basic Books, 2004). None of these books presupposes familiarity with a sophisticated mathematical apparatus.