

Jim Mirrlees (5 July 1936–29 August 2018)

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Jim Mirrlees died in Cambridgeshire in August 2018. He became ill in Hong Kong in late 2017 but was able to be brought home a little while before he died. His beloved and devoted wife, Patricia, wrote [30.8.2018]:

After a day with friends, a special concert with a viola player and pianist from the London Symphony Orchestra and some very happy moments, Jim went into a rapid decline at 8:30 PM and died at 12:30 [AM] with a CD of Schubert's Impromptus playing.

Jim and I were colleagues and friends from the early 1960s on. We were young lecturers in the Cambridge Faculty of Economics and Politics in the 1960s, and were colleagues again when Jim came back from Oxford to Cambridge as Professor of Political Economy and a Professorial Fellow of Trinity in the 1990s, just in time for Cambridge to claim him as their Nobel Prize winner in 1996. Jim and his first wife Gill (Gill died in Oxford in 1993) were friends with Joan and me; we had children of much the same age.

Jim was a brilliant mathematician (when I wrote to Sir Michael Atiyah, the greatest mathematician in the UK in the 20th century, to congratulate him on receiving the maths equivalent of the Nobel Prize, he modestly replied that the nearest he thought he would ever get to a Nobel Prize was having taught Jim at Cambridge). Jim's deep humanity led him to use his enormous mathematical talents in economics. His contributions include criteria for accumulation and development generally in developing countries, economic behaviour when information is imperfect and optimum tax theory. His powerful theoretical contributions were used to design economic policies in developing and developed economies alike.

We did not see eye to eye on the nature of economics – I thought his rigorous approach was too narrow, and he no doubt thought my 'horses for courses' approach too fluffy! Be that as it may, I had the greatest respect for Jim for his integrity, collegiality and basic human kindness. Although Jim ceased to be a believer, he always maintained the most wonderful moral stance. I especially admired how he looked after his graduate students. I do not think that there has ever been as conscientious and supportive a supervisor in our trade. So much of his powerful originality found its way into their dissertations. The Cambridge faculty was noted for unpleasant intrigues and often injustices. Jim was always fair, honest and explicit, especially with those persons immediately concerned.

Joan and I went to Jim's 80th birthday celebrations in July 2016, a most grand affair arranged in great detail by Patricia and held in Trinity Dining Hall. There were many fine tributes to Jim by former students and colleagues – I especially remember Nick Stern's – and wonderful music, principally Scottish, particularly Robbie Burns.

Patricia has Jim just right:

Jim was brilliant and yet he was modest and lived simply. He gave generously of his time and knowledge as a teacher and supervisor in Oxford and Cambridge and as the Master of Morningside College. He was deeply loved and respected and will be sorely missed. His great life is over, but Jim will live on through his work and those he inspired.

To have known him was a great privilege for which I shall always be grateful.

GC Harcourt
The University of New South Wales, Sydney