

Joan Robinson

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A photograph of Joan Robinson shows a young woman, hair in two buns over her ears like Carrie Fisher in Star Wars. She's sitting on the floor, her wedding ring in focus on one knee. She's beginning a journey that will reshape economic thought around the world. But you wouldn't know it from her neutral gaze.

Joan Robinson popularised what economists call the marginal revenue curve—a line used in textbooks to this day to understand monopolies. She shaped, tested, and shared with the world John Maynard Keynes' tools for understanding why recessions happen.

She was consistently on the short list of candidates for the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics, but was never chosen for the award.

To understand Joan's life, and her contribution to economics, it can help to know three people. These three dominated her personal and academic conversations: Austin Robinson, John Maynard Keynes and Richard Kahn.

Austin Robinson was her husband. He was an economist who thrived on academic administration. He was a former seaplane pilot who lost more than half of his school friends and comrades in World War One. He set out quietly to solve economic problems after hearing a lecture series called *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, by a Professor John Maynard Keynes.

Keynes himself would become the 20th Century's most famous economist. He was a generation older, a man with a comb-over and a thick moustache. But he had active, young eyes, a warm smirk, and a modern outlook. He was bisexual, a friend of Virginia Woolf's and an advocate of women's rights. Joan Robinson corralled a group to workshop his ideas; he was a man who both inspired and assisted Joan Robinson's developing career.

And perhaps most fundamentally, Joan's economic explorations were propelled by near-constant correspondence with a handsome and brilliant younger colleague, Richard Kahn, with whom she had an intellectual and then romantic affair that sparked both breakthroughs and breakdowns. Joan's conflicting loyalties would tear her away to a mental hospital in 1938, from which she would rise. She'd emerge stronger, more assured, driving further debates on the fundamentals of the role of capitalism.

Joan Robinson challenged the world to take Karl Marx seriously, to take the People's Republic of China seriously, to take John Maynard Keynes seriously, and to take the neoclassical economics giant, Alfred Marshall, a little less seriously.

In 1933, Joan Robinson gave the world a word.

That word was monopsony. It's when you have only a single person or business that can buy something. Maybe it's high-speed sailboats. And there's only one national yachting team shopping around.

Monopsony is a sort of cousin of a monopoly, where there's only one seller. Railroads. Electricity lines. Pharmaceutical companies. Monopolies are easy to spot.

Monospony—a single *buyer* dominating—this can be a sign of an unhealthy market. Or it could be beneficial. Let's take medical patients. If they all pool together they could negotiate and drive down the price of a treatment.

Monopsony matters. It can signal low competition. And when there's low competition, markets can do strange things.

We'd expect lower wages when there's only one employer in town, for example.

This theory was outlined in Joan Robinson's 1933 book, *The Economics of Imperfect Competition*.

It's maybe a small thing to do. To give the world a word. But this word, monopsony, would describe something that had been overlooked in the past. Something important. A word that could change how we think about how we hire teachers. A word that could change how we think about what labour unions do. And about how we think about Wal-Mart and Amazon today.

Joan was 29 years old. She had just released a book of original insights into market competition. This was her first major achievement in what would come to be a remarkable career in economics.

A child stands at the corner of a Hyde Park lamp post. She recites poetry to the passing crowd. She returns week after week, and a group of regulars soon come and share their own poems. The Hyde Park lamp post is now a poetry club.

The child's name is Joan Maurice. And she is destined for leadership in economics. An unorthodox, blazing sort of leadership. She is a woman in the early 20th Century, after all. And to join the platform of the top economists is a feat, even with her rich family history of dissent, appreciation for the arts, and ties to the colonial elite. To even become a lecturer at Cambridge, as a woman, it takes somebody who has the boldness to stand at a lamp post, alone, speaking out to whoever will join her.

In 1921, Joan Maurice, arrives at Cambridge University on a scholarship. She walks through the brick-orange gatehouse of Girton College, which was the first Cambridge college for women.

Joan reads at Cambridge University Library, where her great-grandfather, Frederick Denison Maurice's bust stands. F.D. Maurice was a Cambridge academic who supported the establishment of the women's college.

But, 50 years later, in the race for gender equality, Cambridge now lags behind other British universities. She enters a university where women are not allowed degrees. Male graduate students have a seat at the administration table; women don't. And the system of scholarships and fellowships through men's colleges are blocked to women.

Joan reads economics. Why? She later said that she didn't know why.

"I did not have much idea of what it was about. I had some vague hope that it could help me to understand poverty and how it could be cured."

But women are not visible as role models in this subject. Her supervisor at the women's college, Marjorie Tappan was one of very few woman economists. Joan would have been

lucky to find any academic papers or books on the subject attributed to women.

In fact, women had been driving forward the discipline for over a hundred years, often as uncredited co-authors of their husbands' works. Joan reads from Alfred Marshall's textbook, *Principles of Economics* which drew, from a book he'd written with his wife, Mary Paley Marshall.

In 1925, Joan earns the equivalent of a second-class degree, but as a woman, is not admitted as a full member of Cambridge University.

Joan feels both grandiose and inferior. She notes her ambition to be like the male economists around her, but realises the chances of an academic career are slim. She later writes that during this time she had the "emotional conflicts of a hermaphrodite."

Soon after graduating she marries her teacher, Austin Robinson. She joins him on his two-year posting tutoring economics in India. And in 1928 she is back in London. She visits Cambridge, asking if there might be an academic position available. Not for her though. For her husband Austin, who is still in India.

She is successful; her husband is employed by Cambridge for a lectureship.

And Joan does look for her own job.

She writes to Austin, "I am a strong believer in the economic independence of married women, and only ask to be allowed to earn some myself."

She finds a job supervising undergraduate economics students. This is low-level tutoring; not necessarily a serious academic position.

Yet in between marking essays, and answering her students' questions, she attends economics lectures. And she has a niggling sense that economics isn't quite answering the right questions.

"Marshall's Principles was the Bible, and we knew little beyond it," she said.

She finds her concerns articulated with mathematical precision by Italian economist, Piero Sraffa. Piero Sraffa is an economist who takes Marx seriously. He saw the world as one of capitalists extracting all they could from workers, and he saw market imperfections as normal. He found logical flaws in Alfred Marshall's work that had been dominating economics up until that point. This fascinated Joan.

At these lectures, Joan attends with a student; a new friend, Richard Kahn. Richard Kahn, Joan Robinson and Austin Robinson quickly become close colleagues. They discuss innovations in economics. They debate concepts like the marginal revenue curve — a line on a graph that allows the study of businesses with market power, like monopolies. And they compare notes on John Maynard Keynes's book, just published, *A Treatise on Money* which appears to offer an explanation for the emerging Great Depression — that recessions can occur if there is too much saving and not enough spending.

Joan is a leading figure in the dissemination of an exciting shift in the study of economics. She and her husband, as well as Richard Kahn, Roy Harrod, Piero Sraffa and James Meade form what they call the Cambridge circus.

And two years later, in the summer of 1932, unemployment from the Great Depression peaks. The Bank of England is scrambling for unconventional tools, from leaving the gold standard in 1931 to targeting higher inflation. Economists are competing for explanations and solutions. That's if they're still taken seriously.

Joan Robinson writes a 14-page pamphlet. It's called "Economics is a Serious Subject." It's a challenge to economists: she writes how stylised assumptions are created by economists just so they're mathematically tractable, not because they fit the real world. The pamphlet is published by the Cambridge student bookstore.

And Joan is galvanized by a sense that perfect competition, the type outlined by Marshall's analysis, is an unrealistic assumption. She wants to put forward economic theories that deal with a more realistic scenario: maybe it's not a full monopoly, but certainly not full competition either. She writes to her friend Richard Kahn, discussing everything from calculus to Shakespeare's sonnets.

Their letter-writing relationship is described in depth by Nahid Aslanbeigui and Guy Oakes in *The Provocative Joan Robinson*. There, the letters start "My dear Kahn," going on to describe in esoteric detail the implications of the marginal revenue curve, or a critique of a new draft of Joan's book on imperfect competition. Although Kahn wasn't credited, given his voluminous input, the book was as much his as hers.

Adding to this, the historical sketch pieces together the emotional drama through Keynes's letters to his wife Lydia Lopokova in early 1932 which describe viewing this sexual tension after going in to Richard Kahn's room for paper:

"His outer room was in darkness, but there closeted in his inner room were he and Joan alone, she reclining on the floor on cushions. We were all embarrassed—they were so much like lovers surprised, though I expect the conversation was only The Pure Theory of Monopoly. I wish I knew how open of their feelings they are to one another. But it seems to me a desperate affair, and how is it to end?"

A week or so later at a small party he observes something not quite right with the husband and wife, Austin and Joan.

"Joan rather white, silent and sad, I thought. Austin went away early, without even asking Joan to come with him. Joan stayed until late, and I am sure Kahn was going to walk home with her. I feel it is a drama, but a concealed one, and having (has it?) no solution."

The pressure for some kind of solution was enormous. But two well-timed assignments abroad meant that this solution could be delayed by at least another year.

Soon Austin leaves for a six-month commission of enquiry in what is now Zambia. In between sharing drafts of *The Economics of Imperfect Competition*, Joan and Richard fantasise about moving country to Denmark or Austria. Joan writes about the “importance of a feeling which is not ‘in the proper’ which does not fit into a pigeon hole of accepted notions.” She even writes an outline of a novel about a love triangle hamstrung by conventions.

Richard Kahn then leaves for a fellowship in America as soon as Austin returns to Britain. Yet the letters continue.

Richard Kahn is at the University of Chicago, attempting to spread the word of Cambridge economics. But he finds the older professors surprisingly indifferent to Cambridge’s *Economic Journal*, and its contributors.

He promotes Joan’s forthcoming book on imperfect competition as something to watch for. He writes to Joan, “If it were not for your book Cambridge would be making a pretty bad showing and my position here would be untenable.”

Kahn repeats this evangelism at Harvard University in 1933, promoting Robinson as an example of how Cambridge was on the bleeding edge of economics.

Joseph Schumpeter, an economist with a towering reputation, had at the age of 49 recently been hired as a professor by Harvard. In 1931 on a lecture tour he had visited Cambridge. It was there that he had met the 27-year-old Joan Robinson. Talking with Richard Kahn back in Harvard two years later, he tells him that Joan is “one of our best men.”

Schumpeter is impressed by Joan and Richard’s analysis in the draft book. Richard writes back to Joan, saying that Schumpeter had said that their new technique of drawing an average productivity curve is “capable of doing very useful work.”

It’s clear that Richard and Joan’s dialogues are generating exciting professional insights. But their personal longing is painful.

In America, Richard tries to convince himself—and Joan—that he has muted any romantic feelings. But this slips in his letters. He writes:

“The more I meet people the more (this sounds like economics) difficult I find it to believe that I can claim to know anybody like you.”

Of course, in the 1930s, divorce was off the table. Nahid Aslanbeigui and Guy Oakes write about her life and career at this time in *The Provocative Joan Robinson*. As they put it, Joan and Richard settle “for a more banal solution: compromise with the requirements of careerism and a surrender to the conventions of Cambridge.”

That's easier said than done. *The Provocative Joan Robinson* screens through letters and telegrams from the time when Richard is on an academic visit of America in 1933. Joan and Richard look a lot like two people in a modern-day long-distance relationship. You could imagine them now, getting upset by the tone of each other's text messages.

Joan asks Richard when he's coming back to Cambridge, and Richard replies "I suppose I shall get back sooner or later," which is followed by silence from Joan. Richard then breaks that silence with an angry letter. Joan replies by telegram "Dont Be Hysterical," followed by a letter three days later with a kind of apology, "If you will forgive me for being dense I will forgive you for being hysterical. I fear my cable was not very well thought out—I was hurrying to catch a train at the time."

Richard Kahn returns, but the busyness of everyday life appears to be a welcome distraction. They return to academic correspondence.

The publisher Macmillan puts out Joan's book *The Economics of Imperfect Competition* in 1933. Joan sketches ways of understanding low competition, and what this does to prices and output. She introduces her word: monopsony. And she makes extensive use of innovative new tools like the marginal revenue curve.

At Harvard, Joseph Schumpeter's review states that the book has "genuine originality" and that, radically, "the time has probably come to get rid of the apparatus of supply and demand."

There are some less positive reviews. Many other economists were turning their attention to the imperfections of markets. There are also debates of attribution. Who came up with which idea?

Months earlier, Harvard's Edward Chamberlin had published a book called *The Theory of Monopolistic Competition*, which covers similar ground to Joan's book. And Cambridge's Gerald Shove isn't quite satisfied about whether his ideas are appropriately cited.

Nevertheless, it is a ground-breaking achievement. Mary Paley Marshall, the wife of Alfred Marshall, writes to Joan. "Thank you for helping to lift off the reproach cast on the Economic Woman."

Arthur Cecil Pigou, one of the leading professors of economics at Cambridge, tells Joan that the book "should give you a very strong claim to the next lectureship that we have going."

And Joan accepts this lectureship. It's part-time, and probationary.

"I now share a cheque book and pay my own bills. I feel the shackles are finally removed," she writes.

She sees it as an opportunity to inculcate the next generation with a new kind of economics. Not what she saw as the partial-equilibrium analysis of Marshall: static models that work under perfect competition. Instead she wants to show an overarching framework, the one that Keynes had been developing, the one she calls the Grand Scheme, and which would soon be published in Keynes's book the *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*.

In the spring of 1934, Joan writes to Keynes, her mentor and employer.

My dear Maynard

I have not had time till now to write out my syllabus. ... I would very much like to be let loose on the Grand Scheme, but I quite see how it is. You must let me know how much you think I shall be able to get away with.

There's another point I think I ought to mention—I am expecting to produce a baby in the summer. I don't think myself that this ought to be considered relevant to the question of lecturing—but I quite see that there is another point of view. ...

I hope this news does not disconcert you too much. I think it is a good idea.

My salutations to Lydia.

Yours

Joan

And in May, Ann Robinson is born. And at the time that Joan is questioning the neoclassical foundations of Alfred Marshall's economics, she's also defying his views on the role of women. In 1896 he had written about women students at Cambridge.

"The girl will in nine cases out of ten be responsible later for the household management ... If she decides to go her own way, and let her family shift for themselves, she gets honours; but her true life is impoverished and not enriched by them."

Joan was fortunate to come from a wealthy family. She had home help, including a nurse. Still, her output at this point is prolific. She wrote three reviews and two academic papers that year while lecturing.

The years following prove to be just as busy, with essays, papers, and reviews pouring out to economic journals. Keynes asks Joan to review his *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. And Joan publishes her second book, *Essays in the Theory of Unemployment* in 1937.

There's a frenetic pace of activity. She publishes a primer to Keynes's *General Theory*.

She gives birth to a second daughter. And judging by letters and records from that time, the year appears to run smoothly. She is granted a full lectureship. But a pressure is building.

Joan is 34 years old. She has had remarkable advancement in her career. She has two daughters, three books, and international acclaim. She is in John Maynard Keynes's inner circle.

But over the years, in light of her closeness to Richard, her husband, Austin, confronts her with what she perceives as sulking fits. Joan lies to him, says there's nothing to worry about. But then, in her words, Joan becomes bitter and hateful because she knows she and her husband are living in "false peace" at home.

Joan writes how she is frightened by Hitler's movements in Europe. She argues with Austin over how to respond to German aggression. She sees a new war as imminent, a cover she uses for prevaricating and seeking reassurance from Richard Kahn. She writes more and more to him. Keynes notices that Joan's mind is "racing." She breaks out in panics. She doesn't sleep for a week.

Austin and Richard write to two friends, a husband and wife pair of psychoanalysts. They book an appointment, and in October Joan is injected with a sedative. Sleeping, she is driven to a mental home in London. Over the next 10 days she is given rounds of drugs to stay sleeping.

While Joan is under heavy sedation, Austin writes to Richard.

"Please don't answer this. I think we shall make it difficult for both of us to be natural again and to be real and follow normally. I feel sure that we are good enough friends to work out a way to our own joint happiness and to Joan's. Never at any time, even when I have been worried and unhappy about our own relation to Joan, have I really wavered in heart and affection towards you."

Austin is anxious too, describing his feelings as "nerves and hysteria."

A month later, Joan is lucid. She asks for Richard Kahn. She doesn't want to see her husband for six months. It's a slow recovery. She misses a term of lecturing. In 1939 she releases just one academic text: a review of a book on monetary equilibrium.

But Joan regains a sense of freedom. Only months later she writes about a feeling she has that she calls an 'imp'. "I have never felt the sweet sane calm delight of the imp so smoothly running thro' my veins as now."

In April 1939, Joan returns to living with Austin. She starts lecturing again. Austin, conveniently, is posted to London as World War II starts. Richard Kahn visits on weekends, and, from letters at the time, their friendship turns physical. But it's a physicality that wavers back to friendship again. She writes to Richard, "friendship is more important than love."

The friendship remains; Joan never gets divorced; and while her mental health slips again in the early 1950s, she never again has a breakdown as dramatic as that of 1938.

Her contribution to economics picks up pace again.

“In 1940, as a distraction, I started reading Marx,” she says.

The western world, with mixed-capitalist systems had just recovered from high unemployment rates from the Great Depression. Meanwhile, due to minimal trade contact, the Soviet Union was largely unaffected and rapidly industrialising. Yet, aside from Piero Sraffa and Maurice Dobb, the economics profession at Cambridge had not taken Karl Marx’s critiques of capitalism seriously.

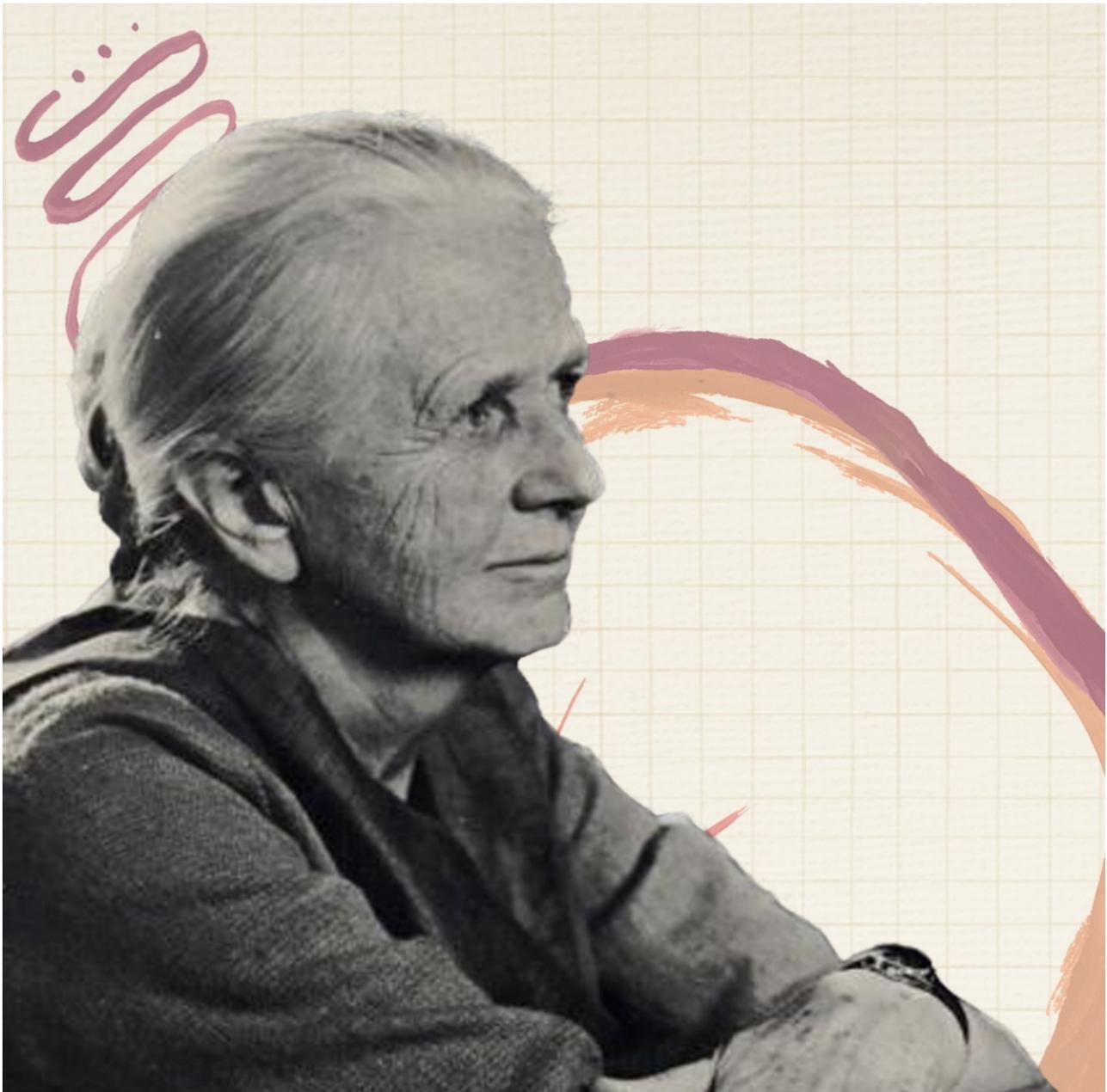
Das Kapital is largely qualitative—Marx writes in prose, not in mathematics. And words like ‘exploitation’ are hard to objectively prove.

That’s an opportunity for Joan. Joan Robinson releases her fourth book in 1942. It’s called *An Essay on Marxian Economics*, a text that tries to marry up the tools from Keynes’s General Theory with Karl Marx’s writings.

“For me the main message of Marx was to think in terms of history, not of equilibrium,” she writes.

And over the next decade Joan contributes to theories on employment, on abolishing poverty, a proposal for an international currency, and on international trade. She is covering a wide base of economic problems, putting forward ideas for how governments can help, with special concern for those struggling to make ends meet.

She visits China for the first time in 1953. Energised by dialogue with Polish economist Michael Kalecki, she starts writing about the path for long-run growth for developing countries. She and Kalecki’s key point is that to understand countries’ future prospects, you have to understand the particular history and growth path of the economy in question.



And it's in 1956 that she shakes up the economics profession with an ongoing controversy. She publishes a book called *The Accumulation of Capital*. In it, she grapples with the idea about what the 'marginal product of capital' is. Students of economics get presented very early on with two ideas: the marginal product of labour — that's essentially how much can a worker get done with the next hour of employment. But what is the marginal product of capital? Is it the next T-shirt that a screen printer creates? Is it the value of the next tonne of steel produced by a steel factory? What units of measurement should be used? Joan looks and looks but can't find a satisfactory answer.

All she was doing, she writes, "was innocently remarking that the Emperor had no clothes." This point is glossed over in textbooks. But no one, not anybody at the highest levels of Harvard or Cambridge knows what this means.

She also claims that neoclassical economics ignores how wealth builds up over time: savings, houses, factories and tools accrue to people who have savings, houses, factories and tools to begin with. And that this makes a difference for analysis.

Robert Solow and Paul Samuelson at MIT disagree. All the way into the 1970s, there are back-and-forth articles, replies and rejoinders in the economic journals. And Joan doesn't mince her words. She calls Robert Solow and Paul Samuelson 'bastard Keynesians'.

She said, "Keynes was diagnosing a defect inherent in capitalism ... the bastard Keynesians turned the argument back into being a defense of *laissez-faire*."

Bob Solow replies, "She is absolutely entitled to end the controversy whenever she wants, just as the author of any work of fiction is entitled to marry off or kill off his characters whenever he feels like."

There's a stalemate. After years and years of back and forth articles in economics journals, the MIT economists acknowledge that Joan is probably right—assuming all types of 'capital' is the same and undefined can affect your modelling of the economy—but they say that this anomaly is inconsequential.

In 1965, aged 61, she finally becomes a professor at Cambridge. At this time her husband has been a professor for 15 years, when he was 52.

At this time, she's an economist's economist. She's publishing on the big questions. Her papers have titles like "Population and Development," "Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory," and "Equilibrium Growth Models."

And from the mid-1960s she publishes heavily on the new Communist regime in China, culminating in a book *Economic Management in China*. Joan's positive views of communist China wouldn't be judged favourably by history, as the full death toll of the Cultural Revolution filtered through to the West over the next decade. Similarly, her prediction that South Korea will eventually give into the superior system of North Korea has proven misguided.

These views might have prevented her from receiving a Nobel Prize. In 1975 she is widely tipped to be considered for a Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics. But she never receives one. Some assumed this was because she was a woman; others say her left-wing viewpoint was the stronger factor working against her. Biographer Marjorie S. Turner writes that "another black mark was possibly Robinson's constant criticism of orthodox theory."

In 1983 she dies aged 79.

In some ways, throughout her life, Joan Robinson stayed the girl she was at Hyde Park, reciting poetry to whoever would listen. Her poetry flowed through her writing. She explained Keynes's early ideas about savings and investments using an analogy peas and gold. She implored her readers to "abandon the mainstream and take to the turbulent waters of truly dynamic analysis." She invoked Voltaire to explain Karl Marx. She had some of the most creative ways of insulting her opponents: Milton Friedman was a 'mystical', Solow 'a clever man who cannot see a simple point', Samuelson one of the 'bastard keynesians'.

Samuelson himself charitably said that Joan's "strong convictions should lead to strong language."

Joan was a person who had learned how to stand alone at a lamp-post. A woman who knew the power of words to form a movement.

Robinson's revolution was alongside others. In the Cambridge Circus she fostered the Keynesian revolution. In over 1,000 letters to Richard Kahn she explored, as he put it, "life, in various aspects of that word." Her feuds across the Atlantic were vessels to share ideas, and, beneath the public debates, was a deep respect from people like Paul Samuelson, who, in her New York Times obituary said, "She has been a very contentious figure, but also a very important figure."

She used theory and graphs, but she also used poetry to expound the great debates between capitalism and socialism over the 20th Century.

She wrote how economists' tools are limited. They have stones, when people are asking for bread. Yet the answer was not to throw away that stone and go into the world barehanded. To Joan Robinson, the economist should humbly use the tools they have, while building better tools.

Two key texts on Joan Robinson's life are Nahid Aslanbeigui and Guy Oakes' *The Provocative Joan Robinson*, and Marjorie Shepherd Turner's *Joan Robinson and the Americans*.

This essay is from the Grid Lines series on Joan Robinson: [Part I](#) and [Part II](#).

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