A. C. Pigou and the intellectual biography of economic thinkers

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What does it mean to write an intellectual biography of an economist?[1] And how, if at all, is it different from writing the intellectual biography of anyone else? As the other contributions to this special issue show, intellectual biographies cover a wide range of subjects and adopt a variety of methodological commitments.[2] If the boundary lines of 'intellectual biography' are not fully resolved, neither are the boundary lines defining 'economist'. As the MIT economist Paul Samuelson once allegedly told W. W. Rostow: 'Walt, you may be an economist among historians, but you are a historian when you are among economists'.[3] The ambiguity of who 'counts' as an economist is especially pronounced in the more distant historical past, before the discipline of economics was formalised.

This article explores the relationship between intellectual biography and economics. It does so by considering three intersecting questions. First, who counts as an 'economist' for the purpose of writing an intellectual biography, and who decides who counts? Second, what is the intellectual output of economists that historians can use to construct intellectual biographies? Journal articles and technical books have long been the bread and butter of historians of economic thinking, but what is the status of popular publications, diary entries and work on committees in intellectual biography? Third (and relatedly), what is the contextual framework for an intellectual biography of an economist? Economists, particularly those operating in the last 150 years or so, have often been figured as part of a relatively intimate intellectual world—a world principally comprising other card-carrying economists. I suggest that a more expansive contextual framework helps to shed light on the important ideas economists developed as well as on their wider impact.

1 Parts of this piece were adapted from my previously published work, including Ian Kumekawa, *The First Serious Optimist: A. C. Pigou and the Birth of Welfare Economics* (Princeton University Press, 2017), doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691163482.001.0001; Ian Kumekawa, 'Measuring the Cost of Pollution', *The Journal of Modern History* 96, no. 2 (2024): 332–61, doi.org/10.1086/730038; Ian Kumekawa, 'The Impulse to Inquire', *Royal Economics Society Newsletter*, October 2022, res.org.uk/newsletter/res-quarterly-newsletter-october-2022/.

2 On biography see Melanie Nolan, *Biography: An Historiography* (Routledge, 2023), doi.org/10.4324/9780429426391.

3 Peter Temin, 'The Rise and Fall of Economic History at MIT', MIT Department of Economics Working Paper Series, 13-11, 6 June 2013, doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2274908.

This article unfolds in three parts. Part I starts with a vignette from the intellectual life of A. C. Pigou, a thinker that few (if any) would have trouble labelling as an 'economist'. It continues by presenting a brief intellectual biography of Pigou. The second part shifts focus to directly consider who counts as an 'economist'. It returns to the original vignette, retelling it from the perspective of Marion Fitzgerald, an economic thinker from outside the canon of economic thought. The third section suggests what might be gained by treating both Pigou and Fitzgerald as economic thinkers and by putting the two of them in conversation. It contends that an intellectual biography of Pigou is enhanced by including Fitzgerald, and vice versa.

I. A footnote in an intellectual biography

Midway through the third edition of *The Economics of Welfare*, a lengthy economics textbook published in 1928, there appears something much loved by intellectual historians: an apparently unobtrusive footnote.[4] Footnote 18, on page 186, reads as follows:

> A valuable investigation was made in 1918 by the Manchester Air Pollution Advisory Board into the comparative cost of household washing in Manchester—a smoky town … [and] Harrogate—a clean town. The investigator obtained 100 properly comparable statements for Manchester and Harrogate respectively as to the cost of the weekly washing in working-class houses. These showed an extra cost in Manchester of 7½d. a week per household … The total loss for the whole city … works out at over £290,000 a year for a population of three quarters of a million.

The note's author, Arthur Cecil (or A. C.) Pigou was a Cambridge professor of political economy, one of the twentieth century's most important and influential economists. Pigou was a foundational figure of both welfare economics and environmental economics.

Pigou spent his entire career at Cambridge, the epicentre of economics in the English-speaking world. In 1908, he had become professor of political economy at Cambridge. At just 30 years old, Pigou was, as the *Gownsman* magazine put it, 'preposterously' young to take over Britain's most prestigious post in economics.[5] He had been handpicked by his predecessor and mentor, Alfred Marshall, for just that role. Marshall held Pigou to be a man of 'quite extraordinary genius'.[6] Pigou was also Marshall's star student: a safe pair of hands to guide the development of a fledgling discipline that Marshall had devoted decades to developing.[7]

4 Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote* (Harvard University Press, 1999).
5 *Gownsman*, 16 May 1910, cited in Kumekawa, *The First Serious Optimist*, 57.
6 Alfred Marshall to H. S. Foxwell, 31 May 1908, in *The Correspondence of Alfred Marshall,* vol. 3, ed. John K. Whitaker (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 190.
7 On Marshall, see Peter Groenewegen, *A Soaring Eagle: Alfred Marshall 1842–1924* (Edward Elgar, 1995).

Pigou and Marshall actively sought to transform their discipline from political economy to *economics*.[8] Part of that transformation meant codifying scientific 'principles', as Marshall did in his highly successful textbook, *Principles of Economics* (1890). Another part of the transformation involved stripping politics from the field. Before becoming professor, Pigou had done a considerable amount of public speaking about the then divisive political issue of free trade (he was all for it). After his 1908 ascension, he 'cut out politics altogether' and effectively stopped discussing free trade except in the most technical terms.[9] Even the hint of political bias was enough to threaten the perception of Pigou's scientific objectivity. And Pigou was more than willing to curtail his own political activities in the service of his (and Marshall's) disciplinary ambitions.

But although Pigou's understanding of academic professionalism and scientific objectivity precluded politics, it certainly did not preclude ethics. His first major book, *Wealth and Welfare* (1912) was full of soaring aspirations for economists to apply scientific methods to maximise welfare. Welfare, for Pigou, 'meant the same thing as good'.[10] For Pigou, the purpose of economics was to yield 'practical results in social improvement'.[11] Pigou's self-understanding was tied up with the emergence of the economics discipline. His identity was intimately linked to what it meant to be an *economist*.

Pigou tempered the ambitious moral language of *Wealth and Welfare* when revising the book into the longer and more famous *The Economics of Welfare*, which went through four successively longer editions between 1920 and 1932. Yet, even as his work became denser and more formalised, his ethical motivation remained largely unchanged. The role of the economist was, according to Pigou, to 'build up an armament of knowledge'.[12] The economist was to be a professional expert whose expertise would improve wellbeing.

In that quest, one of Pigou's most significant intellectual contentions was that there were certain economic activities whose costs and benefits operated outside the reach of the market: what he called 'external effects' and are now known as 'externalities'. Externalities were significant because their existence meant that the price system alone would not maximise societal welfare. Pollution from factory chimneys was one of Pigou's hallmark examples. 'Smoke in large towns', he wrote:

8 Donald Winch, *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Alon Kadish, *Historians, Economists, and Economic History* (Routledge, 1989); Keith Tribe, *Constructing Economic Sciences: The Invention of a Discipline 1850–1950* (Oxford University Press, 2021), doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190491741.001.0001.

9 Pigou to R. F. Harrod, n.d. [1949], The Papers of Sir R. F. Harrod, British Library, Add MS 72764, 235.

10 A. C. Pigou, *Wealth and Welfare* (Macmillan, 1912), 3.

11 A. C. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare*, 1st ed. (Macmillan, 1920), 5.

12 A. C. Pigou, 'In Memoriam: Alfred Marshall, a Lecture Delivered in Cambridge Oct 24, 1924', in *Memorials of Alfred Marshall*, ed. A. C. Pigou (Macmillan, 1925), 84.

> inflicts a heavy uncharged loss on the community in respect of health, of injury to buildings and vegetables, of expenses of washing clothes and cleaning rooms, of expenses for the provision of extra artificial light, and in many other ways.[13]

For Pigou, these 'uncharged losses' accrued quietly and insidiously, hidden by-products of everyday economic life. Smoke pollution (like carbon emissions today) caused major damage, but that damage was not priced. The result was that polluters exacted a silent cost on society, an uncompensated burden for which the market did not provide a solution.[14] In the early twentieth century, as now, recognising the existence of external effects was understood to challenge the market's position as a totalising, organising principle. But Pigou himself did not wish to fundamentally challenge the centrality of the market. Instead, his suggested 'cure' for externalities was to nudge them back into line with the market by a system of taxes and bounties, scaled to their social costs or benefits.

With time, Pigou's ideas on externalities proved enormously influential. As a way of describing the limitations of the market, they served as a foil against which Ronald Coase would develop his eponymous theorem in the 1950s.[15] In the 1960s, economists concerned with environmental costs returned to Pigou's invocation of externalities—particularly pollution—as an intellectual touchstone. Today, Pigou's name continues to be closely associated with environmental economics, particularly through so-called Pigovian taxes on socially harmful emissions.[16]

But external effects were just one (albeit important) part of Pigou's overall intellectual project: building a framework for understanding the economics of welfare using the vocabulary codified by his teacher, Alfred Marshall. Pigou was interested in the explicitly ethical goal of maximising welfare: by growing the overall pot (or national dividend), by limiting its boom-and-bust fluctuations, and by dividing it in the way most conducive to social wellbeing.

Like several generations of liberals before him, Pigou was particularly interested in redistribution. Intuitively, he deprecated inequality. Transferring wealth from rich to poor, Pigou thought, would likely improve overall societal wellbeing. But, like many before him—especially the Cambridge ethicist Henry Sidgwick—Pigou was confronted with the difficult questions of how to scientifically justify redistribution

13 Pigou, *Wealth and Welfare*, 159

14 Kumekawa, *The First Serious Optimist*, ch. 3.

15 Ronald Coase, 'The Problem of Social Cost', *Journal of Law and Economics* 3 (October 1960): 1–44, doi.org/10.1086/466560.

16 H. Spencer Banzhaf, 'A History of Pricing Pollution (or, Why Pigouvian Taxes Are Not Necessarily Pigouvian)', NBER Working Paper 27683, August 2020, doi.org/10.3386/w27683. See also H. Spencer Banzhaf, *Pricing the Priceless: A History of Environmental Economics* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), doi.org/10.1017/9781108867184.

or determine its proper scale.[17] Personally, he sympathised with some limited form of state intervention, but as a professional economist, he struggled to rationalise any action that would not demonstrably improve societal welfare, especially when it meant compromising individual rights and incentives. Put another way, it made sense that some transfer of wealth from the very rich to the very poor would make society better off, but how much? Pigou sought an elusive 'interior solution' to a maximisation problem. And, like other liberals of his generation, he struggled to balance the joint priorities of collective welfare with individual property rights.

J. S. Mill's utilitarian maxim that society should be organised to render 'the greatest good for the greatest number' was, for a scientific economist like Pigou, dreadfully imprecise. Correcting externalities like pollution through taxation offered a way forward—a way for the state to help alleviate inequality that was backed up by solid, scientific economic logic. Externalities were imperfections in the market system; for a believer in the market system, they were economically unsound. And, for Pigou, they were often morally unsound as well. In his view, externalities typically redounded to the interest of the wealthy.

The goal of welfare maximisation, for Pigou himself, was largely academic. From an affluent family, Pigou attended Harrow before matriculating to King's College Cambridge in 1896. Aside from a short stint in the Friends' Ambulance Corps during World War I and summers spent climbing in the hills behind his house in the Lake District, Pigou would never leave his comfortable perch in Cambridge. He was an academic theorist who, though concerned with the plight of the poor, never seriously brushed shoulders with them. This led Pigou to have an abstracted view of who the poor were and how the poor thought. He was immensely condescending about them. 'The poor', he wrote, 'as entrepreneurs of investment in themselves and in their children, are abnormally incompetent'. The poor were, simply put, irrational.[18] For Pigou, they were to be helped, but at a distance.

Pigou's emphases on politics and on ethics evolved over the course of his life, but his dedication to a particular vision of *scientific* economics was unwavering. Take, for instance, his ongoing search for numerical evidence of pollution's cost. Pigou first identified industrial pollution as an externality in 1912 in his first big book, *Wealth and Welfare*. By the publication of his follow-up, *The Economics of Welfare,* in 1920*,* pollution had become Pigou's externality par excellence, a status that it retains to this day.

17 Roger Backhouse, 'Sidgwick, Marshall, and the Cambridge School of Economics', *History of Political Economy* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 15–44, doi.org/10.1215/00182702-38-1-15; Margaret G. O'Donnell, 'Pigou: An Extension of Sidgwickian Thought', *History of Political Economy* 11, no. 4 (1979): 58, doi.org/10.1215/00182702-11-4-588; Martin Daunton, 'Welfare, Taxation and Social Justice: Reflections on Cambridge Economists from Marshall to Keynes', in *No Wealth but Life*, ed. Roger Backhouse and Tamotsu Nishizawa (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 62–90, doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511750649.005. See also Steven Medema, *The Hesitant Hand: Taming Self-Interest in the History of Economic Ideas* (Princeton University Press, 2009), doi.org/10.1515/9781400830770.
18 Pigou, *Wealth and Welfare*, 358.

But *identifying* smoke pollution as an externality was just the beginning of what economics could offer society. Though Pigou was an academic theorist, he had reformist inclinations. His goal for economics was for it to 'bear fruit rather than just light'.[19] To that end, Pigou sought a policy solution for the 'negative external effect' of smoke pollution. Pigou's favoured solution was taxes, but although it was clear to Pigou that smoke pollution had grave (uncharged) economic costs, finding a monetary figure for the damage that it caused was elusive. Without such a figure, Pigou was able to offer a theoretical framework for amelioration, but not a concrete recommendation for *how much* to tax the socially harmful negative externality. So, Pigou kept an eye out for empirical estimates of pollution's costs. Finally, after over a decade and a half, he found data. It was these data that he offered up in 1928 in footnote 18.[20]

In footnote 18, Pigou cited work commissioned by the Manchester Air Pollution Advisory Board that estimated one specific cost imposed on city residents by coal pollution. The Advisory Board had hired a social investigator, Marion Fitzgerald, to study how much more households in Manchester spent on laundry than their counterparts in a 'clean' town. The result was striking: the city was spending nearly £300,000 *extra* on laundry costs because of its smoky air. At last, there was a price that could be attached to the social cost of pollution. Pigou highlighted Fitzgerald's empirical findings in his writings. Combined with Pigou's own theoretical apparatus, they offered a scientific way forward for policy.[21]

II. Who counts as an economist?

The brief sketch of Pigou presented in Part I begins to suggest how one might interpret footnote 18 in the context of Pigou's intellectual biography. Pigou saw himself as a scientist, someone who sought useable knowledge through new empirical (or quantitative) techniques. He was also something of a progressive, even if an armchair one. When Pigou first started working on welfare, he was young, optimistic and committed to providing a scientific rationale for wealth redistribution. But he was also a Cambridge don who led a comfortable, cloistered life of the mind. His surroundings conditioned him. Just as they encouraged him to think in reformist scientific terms, they discouraged the sort of in-the-trenches investigations that were being carried out in the slums of London, York and Manchester. There is a reason that it took 16 years for Pigou to find empirical *evidence*: he never left Cambridge to find it.

19 Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare*, 1st ed., 5; A. C. Pigou, *Economic Science in Relation to Practice* (Macmillan, 1908), 12.

20 A. C. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare*, 3rd ed. (Macmillan, 1928).

21 Pigou, *Wealth and Welfare*, 159.

This brief description of Pigou also suggests how footnote 18 might be interpreted in the context of the 'history of economic thought'. For most of its history, the history of economic thought, as a sub-discipline, has consisted largely of the intellectual biographies of people like Pigou: prominent men working at prestigious institutions. The history of economics has typically concerned people who either self-identified as economists or were subsequently identified by other working economists as such.

It is not coincidental that, until fairly recently, the history of economics has largely been written by people trained and employed in economics departments. The 'classics' of the field were written by economists, from Charles Gide and Charles Rist's *Histoire des doctrines économiques* (1909) to Joseph and Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis* (1954) to Lionel Robbins's *Lectures* (1979–81).[22] For most of the twentieth century, economists were expected to understand their intellectual lineage: a canon of great books that cast long shadows over the economics discipline.

As I have written elsewhere, footnote 18 is significant in the history of the discipline of economics because it reflects a change in how economists thought about the environment.[23] Since the 1970s, environmental economists have highlighted Pigou's writings on externalities as formative for their field.[24] Some scholars of the early (or pre-) history of environmental economics have even figured footnote 18 itself as a milestone. Footnote 18 was one of the first places—maybe even the first place—where the theory and practice of environmental economics came together: where real-life data (in this case from the Manchester Air Pollution Advisory Board) interlaced with an academic model (externalities).[25] It is not hard to see why footnote 18 might be understood in this way. What Pigou is doing in footnote 18 bears a striking resemblance to what contemporary environmental economists do: they have an overarching theoretical framework for how environmental costs are accrued and distributed, but they also rely as much as they can on data to guide remediation, policy and the refinement of theory itself.

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22 Charles Gide and Charles Rist, *Histoire des doctrines économiques* (Paris, 1909); Joseph A. Schumpeter and Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (London, 1954); Lionel Robbins, *A History of Economic Thought: The LSE Lectures* (Princeton, 1998).

23 Kumekawa, 'Measuring the Cost of Pollution'.

24 David Pearce, 'An Intellectual History of Environmental Economics', *Annual Review of Energy and the Environment* 27 (November 2002): 57–81, doi.org/10.1146/annurev.energy.27.122001.083429; Agnar Sandmo, 'The Early History of Environmental Economics', *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 43–63, doi.org/10.1093/reep/reu018; Ottmar Edenhofer, Max Franks and Mattias Kalkuhl, 'Pigou in the 21st Century: A Tribute on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Publication of The Economics of Welfare', *International Tax and Public Finance* 28 (2021): 1090–121, doi.org/10.1007/s10797-020-09653-y.

25 See Sandmo, 'The Early History of Environmental Economics'; Lint Barrage, 'The Nobel Memorial Prize for William D. Nordhaus', *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 121, no. 3 (2019): 884–924, doi.org/10.1111/sjoe.12383; Finn R. Førsund and Steinar Strøm, *Environmental Economics and Management* (Routledge, 2013), ch. 2, doi.org/10.4324/9780203484692; Kumekawa, *The First Serious Optimist*, 76.

There is another economic thinker whose intellectual biography is suggested by footnote 18: Marion Fitzgerald, the researcher who actually carried out the study in Manchester that Pigou featured in his note. And in the context of Fitzgerald's intellectual biography, footnote 18 takes on a rather different meaning.

Fitzgerald was 'a trained investigator' and a public health inspector. She had come to Manchester from East London, where she had served as a sanitary inspector, to work for Ernest Simon, a reformist politician.[26] Before that, Fitzgerald had spent years studying household budgets, especially of the very poor. In 1912, as Pigou was writing about externalities, Fitzgerald was reporting on how poor households in London struggled to afford basic food and how a lack of food compromised recovery from tuberculosis.[27] Fitzgerald understood that, for the urban poor, very small amounts of money made huge differences.

In 1918, the Manchester Air Pollution Advisory Board, a municipal committee on air pollution chaired by her employer, instructed Fitzgerald to compare 'the cost of the weekly washing in working-class houses' in Manchester and a cleaner nearby town, Harrogate. The goal was to arrive at a quantified metric for the cost of pollution. For two months, Fitzgerald investigated, making hundreds of house visits to take surveys about household budgets.[28] She aimed at 'being practical, domestic, and arithmetical but, always … scientific'.[29]

Fitzgerald found that working-class households in dirty Manchester paid 7 ½ pence per week more on laundry than counterparts in clean Harrogate, about 1 per cent of a worker's weekly pay.[30] The total cost that Fitzgerald calculated for all of Manchester was about £290,000. On top of that, Fitzgerald calculated that women in Manchester were wasting 668 years of labour on laundry each year.[31] The premise and the finding of Fitzgerald's study was that smoke had a clear economic cost.

26 'Obituary: Miss M. Fitzgerald', *Manchester Guardian*, 17 January 1953, 2. Manchester had been inspired to conduct such a survey following the example of Pittsburgh. See 'Summary of News: General', *Manchester Guardian*, 3 July 1914, 8; Joanne Smith, 'The Manchester and Salford Women Citizens' Association: A Study of Women's Citizenship' (PhD thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, March 2007), 348.

27 Marion Fitzgerald, 'The Food Problem in the Home Treatment of Consumption', *Journal of the Royal Sanitary Institute* 33, no. 12 (1912): 637–8, doi.org/10.1177/146642401203301206.

28 Manchester Air Pollution Advisory Board, *The Black Smoke Tax: An Account of Damage Done by Smoke, with an Inquiry into the Comparative Cost of Family Washing in Manchester and Harrogate* (Manchester City Council, 1920), in Manchester City Library (hereafter MCL), GB127.M901/12166.

See also Ernest Darwin Simon and Marion Fitzgerald, *The Smokeless City* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1922), 79; Air Pollution Advisory Board (APAB), Minutes, 18 December 1919, MCL, GB127.M901/12166. On the questionnaires, see Report of Statistical Committee on Questionnaire in APAB, Minutes, 13 April 1916, MCL, GB127.M901/12166.

29 'Abatement of Domestic Smoke: Miss Fitzgerald's Lecture', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 November 1929, 16.

30 House of Commons Sitting, *Hansard*, 3 July 1925, Fifth Series, vol. 187, cc. 671–3.

31 Manchester Air Pollution Advisory Board, *The Black Smoke Tax*, quoted in Simon and Fitzgerald, *The Smokeless City,* 79.

Fitzgerald did not use the words 'externality' or 'negative external effect', but she understood that pollution was a cost borne by the rich and poor alike. Yet, unlike Pigou, Fitzgerald was not at all interested in taxing coal pollution. Whereas Pigou conceived of a tax on pollution as a tax on factory owners, Fitzgerald understood it as a tax on everyone. For Fitzgerald, the social investigator who had spent years asking the poor about how they spent their household budgets, it was obvious that to tax pollution was to tax coal itself. Such a tax would be regressive; it would fall disproportionately on the very poor, for whom the (cheap) coal fire was a vital source of warmth, energy and comfort.

In 1922, four years after her work in Manchester and Harrogate, Fitzgerald and her former boss, Ernest Simon, co-authored a short book on smoke pollution and abatement. The book, *The Smokeless City*, was full of economic arguments. For instance: 'Manchester might be a much healthier and pleasanter place … if the public would realise that smoke abatement is … a *business proposition*.'[32] Like Pigou, Fitzgerald understood that pollution had costs. But taxing them would impose even further burdens on the poor.

The better way forward was through a sort of economic education, by which poor polluters would come to understand that burning less coal or using efficient appliances was actually in their own interest. Time and again, reformers like Fitzgerald pointed out that technical improvements—whether improved chimneys in coal-fired factories or gas-powered domestic cooking stoves—would save money on energy bills and repair costs. As the *Manchester Guardian* noted:

> it is by such arguments that the case against black smoke is supported … Enthusiasts used to rail at the manufacturer and insist he must cease desecrating heaven and earth, our architecture, and our lungs.

But the reasoning was shifting towards economics. 'Nowadays', according to the *Guardian,* 'he is chided by the interests of his own pocket'.[33] Education about the harms of smoke pollution and the benefits of efficiency was the way to align the incentives of individuals with the collective good. Education could make Pigovian taxes unnecessary.

After writing the *Smokeless City,* Fitzgerald continued to write about the importance of smoke abatement and efficient domestic appliances. In 1923, in a very Pigovian vein, she discussed 'the curse of cheap coal' in a *Good Housekeeping* article. If coal prices were *higher*, she noted, there would be less pollution and less waste.[34] In 1926, writing in another magazine geared at women, she argued that Manchester voters

32 Simon and Fitzgerald, *The Smokeless City*, 78 (emphasis added).
33 'The Smoke Nuisance: £1,000,000 a Year Wasted in Manchester', *Manchester Guardian*, 10 September 1915, 4.
34 Marion Fitzgerald, 'The Curse of Cheap Coal', *Good Housekeeping* (British Ed.) 3, no. 2 (April 1923), 11.

should think about the 'three-quarters of a million sterling, which they pay *each year* in washing, cleaning, and otherwise repairing the damage done by smoke' when choosing candidates in elections.[35]

By the early 1930s, Fitzgerald's attention turned toward housing policy. She remained steadfast in her commitment to empirical study—particularly social surveys involving household income. At the behest of the Church of England, she undertook several such studies, including one of Church-owned properties around London.[36] 'Patient and thorough investigation', she wrote:

> is the only method whereby we can discover how to meet the needs and the limitations of income of the rehoused people … Judgment, based on verified knowledge, is what is needed for the solution of housing problems.[37]

During World War II, she considered plans for postwar housing. In 1943, she wrote a pamphlet on the importance of designing a 'warm, pleasant, comfortable, labour-saving and economical' small house with efficient (and smokeless) energy usage.[38] The pamphlet, accessible and clear, was exactly the sort of educational material that Fitzgerald had long championed.

Yet by this point, education, as a sort of panacea, had lost some of its lustrous potential for Fitzgerald. Part of the reason for this was that Fitzgerald was paying ever greater attention to the actual material needs of the urban poor and middle class. Education would neither (immediately) feed the hungry, nor house the unsheltered. Fitzgerald focused on physical practicalities. She wrote from 'the woman's point of view'—that is, from the view of actual household managers.[39] From this view, Fitzgerald came to endorse a much stronger version of state intervention than Pigou did. In 1936, she and two other officials of the National Smoke Abatement Society concluded 'that the only effective method of controlling … was the establishment of smokeless zones—that is by-laws under which smoke emission could be made a statutory offense'.[40] Fitzgerald, intimately acquainted with the actual conditions of economic life, came to endorse very interventionist policies to curb pollution: not just taxes, but outright bans.

35 Marion Fitzgerald, 'Smoke Abatement and the November Elections', *Woman's Leader and the Common Cause* XVII, no. 39, 22 October 1926, 335. See also Cyril Elliott and Marion Fitzgerald, eds., *Home Fires without Smoke: A Handbook on the Prevention of Domestic Smoke* (Ernest Benn, 1926).

36 Marion Fitzgerald, *The Church as Landlord: Report of a Survey Made for the Housing Association of the Church Union on Some of the London Properties of the Ecclesiastical Commission* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937). 'The Church as Landlord: Survey of London Houses', *Times,* 23 April 1937, 9; Marion Fitzgerald, *The Small House* (J. M. Dent, 1943), 2.

37 Marion Fitzgerald, 'Housing Problems: Slum-Dwellers' Opinion of Their New Abodes', *Manchester Guardian*, 23 November 1936, 16.

38 Fitzgerald, *The Small House*. The pamphlet was a 'reasoned statement' on building societies, part of a series by 'architects, artists, authors, economists, medical and sociological authorities, and town planners'.

39 Fitzgerald, *The Small House*, 4. In this, she harkened back to the original use of the term 'oeconomia'.

40 'Smokeless Zones in Cities', *Times*, 27 October 1936.

III. Intellectual biography and economic thinking

To return to the animating question of this article: what are 'economic' intellectual biographies? Such a question immediately begs another: what is economics? And since this question has been notoriously difficult to answer, we might consider a more meta version of it: who gets to determine what counts as economics? An easy answer is 'economists'. Economics is a well-established discipline, with purposefully designed institutions and powerful professional organisations. Like those of any field, the borders of economics are penumbral, but there are thousands of people for whom the label 'economist' obviously applies. But who gets to determine what economics *was*? This is a question of mutual concern for both historians and economists. And because labels and meanings change over time, it is worthwhile to approach this question with a flexible understanding of the economic.

Pigou's own life carries a powerful lesson about the importance of taking a capacious view of economic ideas and economic thinkers. Pigou started out as an idealistic reformer. His ambition that economics 'bear fruit'—that it yield scientifically based policy recommendations—motivated his research. The goal of such recommendations was what pushed him to seek out the empirical data that he ultimately found in the Manchester Air Pollution Advisory Board's report. For much of his early life, Pigou had a rosy, even naive, vision of liberal change. Responsible, public-spirited statesmen would consult scientific experts and shape laws accordingly.

But that changed, starting with World War I. The Great War shook Pigou's comfortable world and eroded his youthful optimism. Socially, Pigou retreated, even as his professional stature rose. In the 1920s, he published a series of well-received academic texts, not just on welfare, but also on economic fluctuations and public finance. He also served on several government commissions, including the Cunliffe Committee, tasked with planning postwar foreign exchange policy, and the Royal Commission on the Income Tax. These bodies seemed poised to accomplish significant tasks. Yet Pigou was a largely passive member and emerged disenchanted with the slow and often ineffectual machinations of bureaucratic decision-making.[41] Pigou grew morose. Bureaucrats were inefficient or incapable. Policymakers were blinded by ambition or politics. 'How unlike philosopher kings' they were, Pigou complained.[42]

The Great Depression and the concomitant rising stature of John Maynard Keynes put Pigou further onto the backfoot. Pigou, six years Keynes's senior, was Keynes's longtime colleague at King's College and had advocated for Keynes's election as a fellow. In the 1900s, the pair had socialised at dinner parties 'in magnificent clothes'.[43] Pigou had once written of the younger Keynes that he had both the 'minor gift

41 Kumekawa, *The First Serious Optimist*, ch. 4.

42 A. C. Pigou, 'Presidential Address', *Economic Journal* 49, no. 194 (June 1939), 221, doi.org/10.2307/2225085.

43 Pigou to John Maynard Keynes, 3 October 1907, Papers of John Maynard Keynes, King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, JMK/PP/45/254.

of cleverness … [and] the major one of sympathy'.[44] But in the 1930s, the pair's relationship cooled as Keynes's stature rose at Cambridge and around the world. It took years for Pigou to grapple with (much less accept) Keynes's macroeconomic ideas, not least because in the *General Theory* (1936), Keynes singled Pigou out as the foremost representative of the outdated and complacent classical school. For his part, Pigou resented what he saw as Keynes's arrogant self-promotion and dismissal of their shared mentor, Alfred Marshall. 'Einstein actually did for Physics what Mr. Keynes believes himself to have done for economics', he wrote.[45]

After the 1919 publication of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, which catapulted Keynes to international stardom, Keynes became a politically engaged public intellectual: arguably the first modern economist to assume such a role. Pigou, who had long understood politics to be outside the proper realm of the academic economist, took the opposite tack. He withdrew to the ivory tower, penning increasingly dense and theoretical texts aimed solely at other professional economists.[46]

Even more shaken by Europe's return to war in 1939, and cognisant of his own waning stature, Pigou's optimism faltered. In his 1939 presidential address to the Royal Economic Society, he abandoned the lofty ethical aspirations of his youth: economists followed, he wrote, 'the impulse to inquire—which futile though it may prove, is at least not ignoble'. By then, Pigou had largely given up on his work 'bearing fruit'. Pushed into mandatory retirement upon turning 65 in 1943, he wrote a few economic reports for the government, before moving to his house in the Lake District, where he stayed, in his description, 'a hermit crab'.[47]

Yet there would be a redemptive ending to Pigou's intellectual trajectory. Pigou's youthful aspirations for reform were reawakened, in the late 1940s, by the electoral success of the Labour Party, its pledges to forge a welfare state and momentum behind the so-called Beveridge Plan for a social safety net. Connected to the workings of the Labour government by his friend and former student Philip Noel-Baker, a Cabinet minister, Pigou expressed deep hopes—and, for the first time in decades—a real optimism that the state would successfully intervene on behalf of the poor. It was thus that Pigou, arguably the founder of welfare economics, became a vigorous defender of the welfare state. As he triumphantly wrote in an article in *Diogenes* in 1954:

44 Taken from *The Granta*, 4 June 1904, quoted in Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: Hopes Betrayed 1883–1920* (Macmillan, 1983), 125.

45 A. C. Pigou, 'Mr. J. M. Keynes's General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money', *Economica,* New Series 3, no. 10 (May 1936), 115, doi.org/10.2307/2549064. See also Gerhard Michael Ambrosi, *Keynes, Pigou, and the Cambridge Keynesians: Authenticity and Analytical Perspective in the Keynes-Classics Debate* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

46 Kumekawa, *The First Serious Optimist*, ch. 5.

47 A. C. Pigou to Philip Noel-Baker, 5 June 1945, Noel-Baker Papers, Churchill College Archive Center (CCA), NBKR 9/58/2.

'The welfare state will certainly not stand aside.'[48] By the time of his death in 1959, Pigou had come full circle; he had returned to the political and ethical engagement of his youth, reinvigorated largely by the politicking of his friend.

Pigou was an insider. He was born into a life of privilege. His ascent to the pinnacle of the economics profession was vertiginous. But it was also blinkered. For the most part, Pigou's intellectual influences and sparring partners were either at Cambridge, or in close dialogue with the academic community based there. Pigou was the ultimate creature of Cambridge. He hated leaving, never went to conferences, and never left to collect data or to conduct what today might be called field research.

For intellectual historians, then, there is a very strong impulse to study Pigou through an internalist lens, a lens focused on a relatively small and rarefied group of academics who identified as economists or political economists at Cambridge. Pigou can, and has been, placed neatly within the disciplinary history of economics. His ideas fit comfortably into dialogue with those of other famous economists, who were his friends, mentors and interlocutors: Keynes, Marshall, J. H. Clapham, Herbert Foxwell, Lionel Robbins and F. A. Hayek.

Yet Pigou's life carries a powerful lesson about the importance of taking a capacious view of economic ideas and economic thinkers. It was only with the economic thinking expressed by Labour politicians—especially his friend and former student Philip Noel-Baker—that Pigou rekindled his youthful optimism and support of an interventionist state. Although Pigou did not throw himself into politics, he again started writing for a wider audience and even drafted political speeches on behalf of Noel-Baker. 'For us, no safety first', he wrote to Noel-Baker: 'L'audace, toujours l'audace!'[49] As a shorthand, it might be said that Noel-Baker's political economy changed Pigou's.

In fact, Noel-Baker was just one of many non-academic figures whose political economic thinking shaped Pigou's own. Pigou started out as an idealistic reformer. In this he was surely influenced by his friend C. F. G. Masterman, a reforming liberal with progressive views that generally outstripped Pigou's.[50] Moreover, Pigou's ambition that economics 'bear fruit'—that it should yield scientifically based policy recommendations—motivated his research. The goal of such recommendations was what pushed him to seek out the empirical data on laundry costs that he ultimately found in the Manchester Air Pollution Advisory Board's report.

48 A. C. Pigou, 'Some Aspects of the Welfare State', *Diogenes* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1954), 7, doi.org/10.1177/03921 9215400200701.

49 A. C. Pigou, 'Draft of Speech for Philip Noel-Baker', n.d. [late 1945], Noel-Baker Papers, CCA, NBKR 9/58/2.

50 H. C. G. Matthew, 'Masterman, Charles Frederick Gurney (1874–1927)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, rev. 2011, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34927. See also the chapter Pigou wrote for Masterman's edited volume, A. C. Pigou, 'Some Aspects of the Problem of Charity', in *The Heart of the Empire: Discussions of Problems of Modern City Life in England*, ed. C. F. G. Masterman, rev. ed. (Harper & Row, 1973), 236; Ryo Hongo, 'On the Origins of Pigou's Welfare Economics: Poor Law Reform and Unemployment Problem', Working Paper, Kwansei Gakuin University, Nishinomiya, Japan, 2013.

Pigou's use of data, like those about laundry costs in polluted Manchester, is part of why he has been remembered by environmental economists as a progenitor of the field. Yet it is easy to forget that the data—and indeed Pigou's thinking about it—depended on the research and intellectual labour of others, far from the gated colleges of Cambridge. After all, the people who commissioned the study on laundry costs in Manchester understood pollution as an important and measurable economic cost. Indeed, smoke reformers had understood smoke in such terms for decades by the time that Pigou published his first book. Marion Fitzgerald certainly understood pollution as an economic cost. That is why she collected data on laundry costs in the first place. In a way, then, Marion Fitzgerald's political economy affected Pigou's, even if he did not appreciate the context of Fitzgerald's work.

The intellectual history of economics benefits from a capacious understanding of 'the economic'.[51] It is meant to show how causation and influence seep through the porous boundary between academic theory and everyday lived experience. This is a key reason why taking a capacious view of the boundaries of the history of economics is so productive, and, conversely, why a view that traces economic ideas as a sort of disciplinary genealogy leaves so much out. Understanding Pigou and Pigou's ideas depends on understanding the lives and ideas of figures like Philip Noel-Baker, C. F. G. Masterman and Marion Fitzgerald: economic thinkers who were not *economists*.

There is much to gain from operating with the assumption that all historical actors are economic thinkers, itself a premise of mainstream economic theory for decades.[52] There is also much to gain from treating Noel-Baker and Marion Fitzgerald as economic thinkers, even theorists. And there is much to gain from examining them as the subjects of biographical study, with its emphasis on individual agency, even if set against a backdrop of conditioning structures.

Intellectual biography is the study of intellection and change of intellection over time. It depends on records of intellection, typically written records: publications, archives and personal papers. For this reason, it is no surprise that the conventional subjects of intellectual biography have been drawn from a rarefied group. But all people engage in intellection, whether or not historians have enough data to make claims about it. As a matter of research methodology, it is not possible to trace Fitzgerald's thinking in the same way as Pigou's. But we should prime ourselves to operate as though we could: to treat her and other overlooked figures with the same sense of optimistic potential with which one might approach Pigou, a Cambridge professor who wrote dozens of books and whose personal papers are strewn across famous archives.

51 Ian Kumekawa, 'Reconsidering the History of Political Economy', *Modern Intellectual History* 20, no. 3 (September 2023): 985–95, doi.org/10.1017/S147924432200049X.

52 See, in particular, Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (PublicAffairs, 2011).

The stakes of doing so are high. Although (perhaps because) she was not an economist, Fitzgerald understood the political economy of pollution differently (perhaps even better) than Pigou did. Pigou distilled a theory that ignored political and social contexts. Arguably, this simplification is what made his theory so influential. But during his own life, Pigou's theorising did little to change policy or behaviour because taxing polluters was a political non-starter. Pigou's ideas about pollution bore light, but not fruit. Even the recognition of Pigou as an intellectual forerunner of environmental economics only occurred after his death: his status as an important antecedent was crafted only in historical retrospect.[53] In fact, understanding Fitzgerald's intellectual biography clarifies the shape of Pigou's.

Historians should do what Pigou did not: conceptualise figures like Fitzgerald not just as sources of data, but also as sources of ideas. Doing so provides key context for Pigou's work and legacy, but more than that, it demonstrates how Pigou belonged to a larger ecology of people thinking about the intersection of the environmental and the economic. By placing Pigou's ideas in context and conversation with Simon's and Fitzgerald's, we better understand the history of economics itself. In particular, the multiple stories of footnote 18, and the multiple people responsible for it offer a lesson about the slippage between theory and practice, and between economic abstraction and economic life. Understanding that slippage is a key task for the history of economics and intellectual history more generally.

In that task, biography is an essential tool. Biography helps historians delve into the multiple viewpoints and experiences that went into shaping ideas, economic and otherwise. Moreover, biography forces historians to reckon with agency, to attempt the impossible task of inhabiting the subjectivity of another.

53 Banzhaf, 'A History of Pricing Pollution'; Steven G. Medema, '"Exceptional and Unimportant"?: Externalities, Competitive Equilibrium, and the Myth of a Pigovian Tradition', *History of Political Economy* 52, no. 1 (2020): 135–70, doi.org/10.1215/00182702-8009583.

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