

REVIEWS

A Ramble Through The Actuarial Countryside: The Collected Papers. Essays and Speeches of Frank Mitchell Redington, M.A. Edited by GARY CHAMBERLIN, M.A. (Published by the Institute of Actuaries Students' Society.)

In his introduction, the Editor expresses the hope that the structure of the book, each section introduced by a commentary, will help the reader to plan the rambles he wishes to take in Frank Redington's company. Such a leisurely approach is not open to a reviewer. The obligation to read the book straight through from cover to cover has its own advantages and rewards—not least in hinting at the enormity of the task that Gary Chamberlin undertook.

The last sentence of Stewart Lyon's foreword is: "The book will bring back many memories to those who knew him, and give others an insight into a remarkable but very human being who became a legend in his own lifetime." That, as the preparation of the book proceeded, became its purpose. To achieve it, Gary has carefully and effectively selected and edited material to ensure that readers see Frank as a combination of a man of ideas and a scholar with a remarkable ability to communicate. The structure of the book is essentially chronological, although not slavishly so, and in that sense shows Frank's life through the various interests which dominated as his career developed; thus National Pensions were uppermost in his mind during the periods of his Presidency and Chairmanship of the relevant industry committee.

The final section of the book, 'Last Reflections', contains essays in which Frank himself reviews his own life's work. The last, previously unpublished, is the most substantial. It indicates the reality that most of Frank's studies stemmed from the business circumstances of the time which he then developed in a more general or theoretical way. But the practical was never far away. It comes as something of a shock to find Frank describing immunization as little more than a curiosity. Whether history will make that judgement or not, the practical value of the concept, and similar ideas which others were working on at the time, was the stimulus given to the profession to think about the nature of life assurance business with renewed insight. Similarly, 'The Flock and the Sheep' reflected a phase of change in life assurance business which he felt had been overlooked or at least its effects underestimated. Perhaps he was not altogether right in that judgement, but there can be no doubt that many benefited by being forced to face the question he posed—as always in such vivid language. At the same time his papers showed an ability to clarify the issues he invited the profession to address, to look outside the narrow confines of the current problems, and included flashes of wisdom from which readers of any generation can benefit.

Bernard Benjamin has suggested that moving further down the road was always the real excitement to Frank. In 'Prescience and Nescience' he admitted his concern about unconscious plagiarism. Yet he knew perfectly well the fundamental tools of research and showed glimpses of this when the spirit moved him. The early part of 'An exploration into patterns of mortality' shows him at work—hypothesize, test, reject or refine, repeat. It also shows the benefit of hard slogging calculating work while thoughts churn freely in another part of the mind. But the academic approach deserts him when in full flow of ideas in the philosophical debate in Part II. But would we want it otherwise? Those who worked with him and were inspired or occasionally infuriated by him would have missed a great experience in their lives had he been a different person.

The Editor rightly draws attention to Frank's style of writing with his musical analogies and imagery taken from nature. On some occasions the choice of a special phrase—the expanding funnel of doubt—comes immediately to mind—adds a visual dimension to our understanding of the concept. On others, words are chosen as much to arrest as to illuminate: his style demanded attention. Bernard Benjamin has drawn attention to the odd choice of the word 'angle' in relation to the shape of the curve of deaths; it made the reader think as its user must have intended. But he could suppress his own personality when it was right to do so as the heartfelt memoir to Wilfred Perks on page 335 shows.

A number of the later works contain a tinge of sadness—for example, his reference on page 224 that addressing the Institute in 1971 was a man with 13 years of disillusionment (on National Pensions) behind him; or his continued concern about the misuse of words such as investment, contracting out and valuation. He set his own sights high and perhaps some degree of frustration at failing to take the

world with him on all matters was inevitable. But surely no-one who worked with him, in his office or other business affairs, who corresponded with him, or who just watched him making a speech in Staple Inn, has remained unaffected by him. The book enables readers to create or recreate the influence of that remarkable man.

In developing the purpose he ultimately chose for the book, the Editor has rejected other possibilities. For example, if the purpose of the book had been to facilitate a study of the development of actuarial thought as seen through Frank's work, sub-division into the three main topics—mortality, National Pensions, and, as a group, valuation, solvency and bonus distribution—with more precise attention to date order within these three broad areas, would have been preferable. Such a course would have suggested an academic approach to the work with a fuller exposition of the background, economic, social and actuarial, in the linking commentaries. In his remarks at the Students' Society meeting, Ronald Skerman touched on the need to see the development of Frank's thoughts on bonus distribution in particular against the changing background of each phase. Frank to some extent provided a corrective in the essays at the end of the book. Yet, while he sometimes chided others for failing to learn the lessons of history, he admitted on page 400 that he was neither an historian nor a patient scholar. It is quite probable that his admiration for Maurice Ogborn's description of the early history of life assurance in 'Equitable Assurances' stemmed from his recognition that that author was able to project himself back into the economic and social conditions of the time to paint a picture of the challenges being faced by our early predecessors in the right context. Frank goes close to achieving this in the previously unpublished reminiscences about National Pensions. That paper is interesting too for the comment on page 512 that the discussions with Richard Crossman steered clear of ideology and took place in an amicable atmosphere. In contrast, the later discussions centred on concepts dear to the hearts of their authors, Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher, who turned away from experts offering unpalatable advice. Perhaps one has to accept that professional advice is only effective to politicians when it is supported by messages which move their life blood—those concerned with obtaining or retaining power—and that is not the field in which most actuaries, certainly not a Frank Redington, are comfortable.

Given Frank's own admission that he was not a patient scholar, a full critical analysis of his work would have been out of place. The Editor has perhaps on occasion claimed more for Frank than was necessary but no more than many who have been magnetized by his infectious spirit. Equally, he has included many of the speeches which criticized or tested Frank's own views as well as written contributions in which he apologized for slightly petulant immediate reactions to adverse comment.

The foreword suggests that the preparation of collected papers and speeches might of itself have been a worthwhile objective—possibly to give future generations ready access to the collected works. If so, one would have had to question the propriety of omitting papers which are regarded as dated or flawed and editing or omitting some of Frank's own speeches. The Editor has very properly ensured that the reader has a full list of references, but the inclusion of speeches taken out of context would clearly have been pointless. The book also contains material written or spoken by others or written jointly. The document 'National Pensions—An Appeal to Statesmanship' is an example of a paper with joint authorship which is rightly included because Frank's contribution to content and presentation were particularly marked. CMI reports, prepared during his membership of the Committee, and particularly during his Chairmanship, could perhaps have received a mention but there is no reason to believe that his part in their preparation was greater than that of other members of the Committee at the time. One could question the inclusion of the speech by the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the Biennial Dinner during Frank's Presidency, the reordering and the cutting of other speakers' remarks, but the former was needed for the full appreciation of Frank's reply and the treatment of speeches in discussion was essential to aid the flow of the book.

Clearly the book does not set out to be a biography. The chronology on page 544 omits the fascinating fact, reported by Gary at the Students' Society meeting on 20 May 1986, that Frank won the long jump in the Prudential sports in 1937 with a leap of 21 ft.—surely a remarkable achievement for a man of his stature. The delicate memoir by Ronald Skerman adds flesh to the record of dates and also brings out very clearly the interaction between his interests in his company, the Life Offices' Association and the actuarial profession and the expression of his actuarial ideas in papers and speeches.

The test by which the editor should be judged is the effectiveness with which he has brought out those ideas and their expression. Gary passes that test with flying colours because the book is eminently readable in a way that no alternative approach could have matched. The structure of the book with its eight divisions, the selection and omission of speeches, their reordering, where necessary, have all been done with great skill to ensure that the book flows well. More particularly, the commentaries are perfectly attuned to the task. The choice of style of his own writing, somewhat lyrical and using the images of the countryside and music—but never attempting to copy Frank slavishly—ensures continuity. The inclusion of a list of quotations again indicates a light touch which is appealing, especially following Frank's last paper 'Prescience and Nescience' which contains somewhat sober reflections on his life's work but typically ends by throwing out challenges just as he always did.

The core of the book is, of course, the work of Frank Redington but most of that is already recorded elsewhere. What Gary has done is to create around that core a book which it is a real pleasure to read.

E. B. O. SHERLOCK

Age, Capital and Democracy. Member Participation in Pension Scheme Management. By TOM SCHULLER. (Gower Publishing Company Limited 1986)

In recent years there has been an increasing public awareness of the very substantial aggregate investment backing for Pension Schemes.

The Inland Revenue, Company Accountants, Trade Unions, Politicians, Economists and others have all, not surprisingly, become interested in how these funds have developed and are being and will be distributed.

Actuaries have been advising Employers and Trustees on the relationship between assets and liabilities of Pension Schemes since their inception and consider it to be one of the responsibilities of the Actuarial Profession to contribute to the general discussion.

I believe it is fair to add that much which has been written following the recent increase in interest in Pension funding has not been as well informed as it should be, particularly where one of the main reasons for the interest has been the gradual appreciation of the vast investment backing for the funds or where one might expect a strong political viewpoint.

Despite my initial misgivings (partly due to the title) my conclusion is that, apart from the feeling that insufficient emphasis is given to the considerable growth in liabilities offsetting the assets, this book does not fall into the above category.

In fact, I believe that actuaries can learn from an author who sees the problems of pension funding from a different point of view. The book contains much original research and a number of items of historical interest (such as the rather arbitrary considerations that led to the decision that 65 should be a 'normal retirement age').

The likely effects of the concentration of investment decisions (but with accountability to many members), the changing attitudes of the Employers concerning the reasons for setting-up and maintaining schemes and the wider responsibilities of Trustees, are all discussed.

The book poses a number of unanswered questions. Some of the 'questions' are indeed of a political nature. Nevertheless I found the book to be of interest and it could be the source of discussion amongst actuaries.

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