

# Renee Prendergast Reviews Richard van den Berg (ed), “Richard Cantillon’s Essay on the Nature of Trade in General. A Variorum Edition”

*Richard Cantillon’s Essay on the Nature of Trade in General, A Variorum Edition*. Edited by Richard van den Berg. London and New York: Routledge, 2015. Pp. 514. £120. ISBN 9781138014589.

Reviewed for THETS by Renee Prendergast (Queens University Belfast)

*The Essai sur la nature du commerce en général* was first published anonymously in 1755. It soon became accepted that the author was one Richard Cantillon, a banker of Irish extraction who had become fabulously rich by exploiting the opportunities provided by John Law’s system in France and the South Sea Company in London. Cantillon had been murdered in London in 1734 and one of the many puzzles surrounding him and his work has been lapse of over twenty years between his death and the publication of his great work.

For many years, the standard edition of the *Essai* in the English-speaking world has been that produced by Henry Higgs for the Royal Economic Society in 1931. The edition includes the text of the 1755 print edition of the *Essai* alongside Higgs’ translation. In making his translation, Higgs made use of the extracts from the essay that had been included without attribution in works by Malachy Postlethwayt. Higgs assumed that these extracts were taken from an original English version of the *Essai* of which the published French version was a translation (Higgs, 1931). We have no proof that this was the case, but Higgs’ procedure had the advantage that translation was in the English of the eighteenth century. Given this, and the known authenticity of the printed French version, some scholars take the view the Higgs’ translation is ‘as close as a modern English speaker is going to get to hearing Cantillon’s voice’ (Brewer, 2001:xii). Others, including van den Berg, have expressed strong doubts and two new translations of the *Essai* have recently been published by Saucier and Thornton (2010) and Murphy (2015).

Higgs characterised the differences between the French version of the *Essai* and Postlethwayt’s excerpts as ‘some small deviations from the turn of a phrase ... but never from the sense’. Richard van den Berg is not convinced. His doubts first emerged when he came across an interesting addendum on the role of the entrepreneur in the entry on circulation in the *Dictionary*. This led him to attempt a systematic comparison between the *Essai* and Postlethwayt’s dictionary.

It is evident from van den Berg’s comparison that Higgs’ claim that the whole substance of the *Essai* is to be found in the *Dictionary* is inaccurate. Only about 36% of paragraphs in the French text have close counterparts in the Postlethwayt text. Van den Berg is even more categorical that the differences in wording are more than differences in turns of phrase and

that the formulations in the *Dictionary* version differ sometimes substantially from the French publication.

Although Postlethwayt made use of only 36% of the paragraphs that appeared in the final French text, the table of correspondence supplied by van den Berg seems to indicate that he had access to a document that covered the full range of material in the French version. Hence, it is likely that the exclusion of material was determined by the needs of Postlethwayt's own editorial enterprise. The issue of wording is less straightforward. While van den Berg is of the view that the Higgs' translation conceals differences in nuance between the dictionary and the French text, he also finds some evidence to suggest that Postlethwayt reproduced Cantillon's text more or less faithfully. Given this and the fact that the dictionary also contains a number of passages that appear to have been taken from Cantillon but which do not have counterparts in the French text, van den Berg makes a strong case that the manuscript used by Postlethwayt differed from the French text. Elsewhere, following some suggestions made by Antoin Murphy (2009), van den Berg (2012) has speculated that the manuscript of the *Essai* used by Postlethwayt was of a later date than that used in the first French publication.

Whereas Postlethwayt used material from the Cantillon's essay without attribution, Philip Cantillon stated on the title page of *The Analysis of Trade and Commerce* that its content was taken chiefly from the manuscript of a deceased gentleman but adapted to the present situation of trade and commerce. Higgs (1931) argued that the *Analysis* mutilated the *Essai* badly, omitted large portions, altered others and padded it with material from other writers. Others including Murphy (2009) have commented in a similar vein. Van den Berg, however, is of the view that large portions of the *Analysis* are actually the work of Cantillon and that they derive from an early version of the *Essai* possibly written in French. Van den Berg identifies all the passages in the *Analysis* that have counterparts in the *Essai* or in Postlethwayt's *Dictionary*. He also includes a smaller number of other passages which do not have direct counterparts but which involve arguments made in those works.

We are now in a position to discuss the main content of the variorum edition. The verso pages contain the original 1755 print version of the *Essai* (labelled E), the extracts from Postlethwayt's *Dictionary* (labelled D) and the extracts from the *Analysis* (labelled A). The arrangement of these extracts follows the order of the *Essai* rather than the order in which they appeared in the English publications. However, a table of correspondence allows each paragraph to be traced to its original source. The first column on the recto pages (labelled H) contains the Higgs translation of the *Essai*. The second column (labelled V) contains variations and errata with a third column (labelled C) reserved for the editor's comments. If pages of the text are selected at random, it will be found that some have neat and orderly columns that are the same width throughout the page whereas others have columns of varying width and very little blank space. This is due to the need to accommodate paragraphs of different length from the different sources as well many or few variations and the editorial comments. In all the cases examined by the present writer, there was no difficulty in using the editor's apparatus even for pages that looked forbidding at first sight. This is no mean achievement on the part of the author and the publishers.

So far, four of the texts included in the variorum edition have been discussed but much more is involved. Although there is no known English language manuscript of the *Essai*, there are at least four French manuscript versions. Three of these belonged to Mirabeau who according to his own testimony had a manuscript of the *Essai* in his possession for a period of 16 years

before being obliged to return it to its rightful owner. One of these manuscripts is an abridged version of the whole of the *Essai*. The other two are transcripts of parts of the *Essai* accompanied by Mirabeau's running commentary, which he eventually published separately as *L'Ami des Hommes*. All these manuscripts appear to have been composed in the early 1750s and are presumably based on the manuscript held by Mirabeau. The last and most important of the French manuscripts is the Rouen version. This is the only known complete manuscript version of the *Essai*. It remained undiscovered until it was located in the 1970s by Takumi Tsuda, who published a transcript alongside the text of the original French edition (Tsuda, 1979). There is evidence to suggest that this manuscript was written before 1740 and that it was dictated rather than transcribed. Imperfections of grammar and wording suggest that it was not intended for general circulation; they may also suggest that it was a translation, but this remains uncertain. Comparisons of the Rouen manuscript with the versions owned by Mirabeau, as well as Mirabeau's own testimony, suggest that the Rouen manuscript may well have been his source. It is also likely that it is the manuscript on which the 1755 print edition of the *Essai* was based though again there is no certainty.

In addition to the manuscript versions of the French text, van den Berg has also scrutinised the subsequent print versions. He finds that the 1756 edition is more or less a reprint of 1755. A further French edition produced as part of a series in 1756 included many changes mainly of stylistic nature. Few additional changes were made when the series was republished in 1769.

The bulk of the material contained in column V (Variations and Errata) refers to differences between the French manuscripts and the 1755 printed text. Some also refers to differences between the extracts found in Postlethwayt's Dictionary and those found in two of his other works. These are: his early proposal for a universal dictionary (Postlethwayt, 1749) and his *Great Britain's True System* (Postlethwayt, 1757). In his introduction, van den Berg notes that these differences are in most cases minor and rarely affect the meaning of the argument.

Column C, the final column of the edition, contains the editor's comments. These include comparisons with the work of Cantillon's predecessors, cross references to material in other editions or in a different part of any given edition, comments on the Higgs' translation and suggestions as to the influence of Cantillon's essay on later authors.

There are four introductory chapters in the volume. In the last of these, van den Berg considers the ways in which his edition advances our understanding of Cantillon's work. His first suggestion relates to language. An innovative thinker like Cantillon had to find ways of using language to express new ideas. A variorum edition of his work has the potential to facilitate close study of how he employed words in new uses and in new contexts. It also has the potential to enable us to distinguish between the original wording used by Cantillon and the alterations of later editors. Van den Berg's second suggestion is that differences between alternative formulations of similar ideas invite speculation about developments in Cantillon's thinking. Examples of this are van den Berg's own explorations of the development of Cantillon's monetary thought (van den Berg, 2012) and his views on profit and interest (van den Berg, 2014). The final use relates to the fact that the different published versions of Cantillon's work were read by different people in different countries. Thus, with some important exceptions, Postlethwayt's *Dictionary* and Philip Cantillon's *Analysis* were means by which English-speakers became familiar with Cantillon's thought. On the other hand, neither Postlethwayt nor Philip Cantillon appears to have attracted a substantial readership in France where the printed French versions of the *Essai* held sway.

This variorum edition of the *Essai*, together with the scholarly material contained in the introductory chapters and the comments, represents a breathtaking amount of meticulous scholarship. It is a huge achievement and opens up avenues for future work along the lines suggested above. However, there is considerable doubt that this will provide any final resolution to questions relating either to the interpretation of Cantillon's work or to the provenance of the versions we know to exist. Van den Berg makes no claims that it will. Given this, should we follow Tony Brewer's (2001) suggestion and simply accept the French text of the *Essai* as representing Cantillon's views since it is the most complete and best-attested version we have? I have a lot of sympathy with that position. The French text shows Cantillon to have been one of the clearest of thinkers and a theorist whose ideas were fully grounded in the realities of the real economies that he knew. Still, the mysteries surrounding both the man himself and the publication of his work will continue to seduce scholars. It is right that they should. The Rouen text was only located in the 1970s as a result of Tsuda's scholarly endeavour and van den Berg's variorum edition reinforces the expectation that other versions existed in the past and perhaps await discovery.

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