

Introduction

WHY A BIOGRAPHY OF FRANCIS YSIDRO EDGEWORTH?

A book-sized biography of the economist and statistician Francis Ysidro Edgeworth (1845–1926) is a worthy endeavour for three reasons.

First, there is a series of articles portraying Edgeworth: Bonar (1926), Keynes (1926), Price (1926), Bowley (1934), Hildreth (1968), Kendall (1968), Stigler (1978), Hicks (1984b), Creedy (1986), Newman (1987) and Mirowski (1994). However, there is no complete book about his life.

Second, over time historians of economic thought have come to pay greater attention to Edgeworth's work. As just a foretaste of this interest, I could mention that though in Edgeworth's times his scientific work was relegated to the background due to Alfred Marshall's predominance and Karl Pearson's and Maynard Keynes's lack of generosity, his work is now indispensable for grasping the genesis of current thinking in economics. Moreover, knowledge of Edgeworth's life supplies a vivid portrait of the personal and intellectual relationships amongst the marginalist and non-marginalist economists of those times, including Jevons, Marshall, Foxwell, Walras, Pantaleoni, Pareto, Wicksell and Keynes.

Third, a more personal reason is that Edgeworth's mother was Catalan: Rosa Florentina Eroles. The only thing known about her, when I started my research, was that she was the daughter of a Catalan refugee in London (Keynes, 1926) whose name was Antonio. According to a note from Lord Holland in December 1831, he was a general who participated in an expedition against Ferdinand VII of Spain and was very likely a close relative of the Baron of Eroles, the well-known proponent of absolutism (Hicks, 1984b). As a Catalan economist myself, it was a challenge for me to discover who the Eroles were and where they came from. Moreover, the Nobel prize-winning John Hicks accepted Lord Holland's assertion and conjectured that this Antonio Eroles was a brother of the Baron. Obviously, the possibility of proving this thesis wrong added appeal to the research.

The Four Stages in the Research

Throughout the fifteen years of research, I can distinguish four stages.

In the first stage, my goal was to write an article to prove the falsity of Hicks's conjecture about Antonio Eroles, since both Fontana and Lluch were convinced that as he was an exile in London and had participated in the 1830 expedition against Ferdinand VII, he could never have been an absolutist.¹ The files in the Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya about Joaquín Ibáñez-Cuevas y de Valonga, Baron of Eroles prove that he had only sisters and helped me to conclude that Lord Holland had erroneously confused a surname, Eroles, with a title, Baron of Eroles. However, since there are no documents about General Antonio Eroles in the Archivo General Militar of Segovia I did not know how to pursue the research, so I temporarily set it aside.

Without knowing that I was entering a second stage in the research, in the summer of 1998 I travelled to Ireland as a tourist. While there, I took advantage of the fact that the coach was going through Edgeworthstown, to visit the church and the manor house of the Edgeworth family, now a senior citizens' residence, to ask the nun who greeted me if there were any family letters or documents. The nun replied that there had been a huge amount, which was ultimately deposited in the National Library of Ireland. During the summers of 1999 and 2000, I stayed in Dublin for three weeks and in Oxford for two, where I examined the Edgeworth manuscripts kept at the National Library and the Bodleian Library. It is an endless task because Francis Ysidro Edgeworth's Irish grandfather, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, married four times and had twenty-two children, including Maria, the famous writer, and Francis Beaufort Edgeworth, child number twenty-one, who at the age of twenty-two married Rosa Florentina Eroles, then sixteen. They went on to have seven children, the youngest of whom was the economist and statistician. The heap of correspondence is spectacular – more than two thousand letters, among them one maintaining that Antonio Eroles was endorsed by the generals Mina (Espoz y Mina) and Àlava, and therefore that he was a liberal constitutionalist. These initial findings were published as an article in the *Revista Econòmica de Catalunya*. Meanwhile, I realised that the Edgeworths were an Irish family that had experienced noteworthy historical events in Britain during the end of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. As a by-product of this research, I wrote a fictional narrative on the most relevant events – both good and bad – that they had witnessed. This novel, written in Catalan and called *Retrat de família sobre fons de trèvols*, won a literary prize, the Premi Sant Joan de Literatura Catalana 2001, that led to more than 50 000 copies being printed.

Immediately after winning the prize, I decided to concentrate on Francis Ysidro Edgeworth, whom I had left in the novel at the age of nineteen on his way to Oxford. This ushered in a third stage of research that has driven me to consult a variety of manuscripts and documents once again at the National Library of Ireland, the Library of Trinity College Dublin, the Bodleian Library and Nuffield College at Oxford, the London School of Economics, the British Library, University College London, and King's College Cambridge. I got a good deal of information, and among all the documents consulted I noticed a letter dating from 1832 from Francis Beaufort Edgeworth to his mother, in which he tells her that his father-in-law, Antonio Eroles, appears in a French book as the commander of the 'Organce' militia that in 1822 had seized a pair of smugglers in Andorra following orders from the staff of general Mina. There was no reference for the French book in the letter, but I found it at the Biblioteca de Catalunya: F. Galli (1831), *Campagne du Général Mina en Catalogne*. Since 'Organce' did not match any existing place, with a map I deduced that it meant Organyà.

With this location pinpointed, a fourth stage of research, which ran parallel to the third, got under way. Via the Internet, I contacted an economist from Organyà, Amadeu Rocamora, who kindly searched the registers of marriages, burials and baptisms in Alt Urgell at the Diocesan Archives of La Seu. Unfortunately, the baptismal record in Organyà has disappeared, and we have been unable to confirm the christening of Francis Ysidro Edgeworth's mother, Rosa Florentina Eroles, in around 1815. Nevertheless, Rocamora found in the books of El Pla de Sant Tirs the baptismal and marriage records for Edgeworth's maternal grandparents, as well as the baptisms of his aunt and uncles Eroles. All these findings were confirmed with the help of a letter written in 1844 by his aunt Maria Edgeworth, where she explains that Isidro Eroles had become a lawyer. This induced me to look for his student file in the Historical Archives of the Universitat de Barcelona, where all the information dovetails with Rocamora's findings in the books of El Pla de Sant Tirs. This search is explained in my articles 'Els orígens alturgellencs d'un economista famós: Francis Ysidro Edgeworth' (2004a) and 'Francis Ysidro Edgeworth's Catalan grandfather' (2004b).

Nature of the Portrait

This book does not pretend to offer a profound intellectual portrait of Francis Ysidro Edgeworth; rather it is simply a personal portrait that can help us grasp his temperament and his feelings in order to better understand his development as an individual and as a social scientist. His works

in both economics and statistics are simply described; the analysis and exegesis of them are not attempted as there are recent texts that satisfactorily cover both fields, namely those mentioned above and particularly Stigler (1978) on statistics and Creedy (1986, 1998) on economics.

I have tried to focus on the challenge of building a personal portrait, in spite of the fact that the biographical sources were mostly family letters which were dispersed in several archives in Dublin and Oxford. I have especially worked with manuscripts – with handwriting that is often difficult to decipher – which overwhelm us with apparently insignificant details when examining each document. However, along with Seurat I believe that by joining thousands of tiny specks of colour we may manage to paint a vivid image, and from the thousands of details contained in the family letters and poems we may yield a chronicle through which we can paint a quite precise personal portrait. As Maria Edgeworth said:

We cannot judge either the feelings or of the characters of men with perfect accuracy, from their actions or their appearance in public; it is from their careless conversations, their half-finished sentences, that we may hope with the greatest probability of success to discover their real characters. The life of a great or a little man written by himself, the familiar letters, the diary of any individual published by his friends or by his enemies, after his decease, are esteemed important literary curiosities.²

NOTES

1. Professor Josep Fontana and Professor Ernest Lluch have been two of the most distinguished scholars on eighteenth and nineteenth-century Spanish economic history. Josep Fontana is now Emeritus Professor of the Universitat Pompeu i Fabra. Ernest Lluch was assassinated by ETA in November 2000.
2. Maria Edgeworth (1800), Preface.