

Jim and Gill Mirrlees, 1959-1965

By Charles Goodhart

I first met Jim Mirrlees in October 1959. He and I were assigned together to David Champernowne as our Economics tutor in Trinity College, Cambridge. I had previously done two years of straight Economics, (getting Firsts), whereas Jim had moved over from Maths. So, initially, I was slightly put out that Champ (as he was commonly known) clearly thought that Jim's ability at Economics was potentially much greater than my own. Of course, Champ was absolutely correct. But I soon found Jim so nice, with an understated wit and absolutely straightforward and unassuming, that we became good friends. In due course, we both got Firsts again in the Finals. I then went off to Harvard to try, unavailingly, to improve my technical shortcomings, but also to get a PhD, whereas Jim remained at Trinity to do research, notably to help Nicky Kaldor with a growth model.

We both married shortly after graduation. When I returned to Trinity, in the summer of 1963, along with my wife, Miffy, as a Research Fellow, I found Jim ensconced there with his new wife, Gill (she was, as I recall, never known as Gillian). They were a lovely couple. Gill was a Cambridge girl, beautiful and with the same fair complexion as Jim. She was a wonderful foil for him, and they were clearly deeply in love. At that time there were three of us, similarly young couples at Trinity, along with the Mirrlees, there were the Moffatts, Keith and his wife, Linty, both Scottish. Keith is a mathematician also, specializing in fluid dynamics. For a few years we formed a happy little social group. In 1965, however, the then Chairman of the Economics Department, Ken Berrill, threatened that, unless I was prepared to take up a position of Secretary of the Economics Faculty, I would not get tenure. In a weak moment I accepted. But I was so horrified at the thought of giving up a couple of years to a purely administrative role, that I took the next available job out, becoming a junior economist in George Brown's Department of Economics Affairs (DEA).

After that, Jim and my own paths never really crossed again, either professionally or geographically. By the time that he returned to Trinity after Gill's death, I was firmly off on a separate career in LSE and the Bank of England. But the main purpose of writing this short note is to emphasise how important a role Gill played in Jim's early life, and how devastated he was at her early and untimely death.