



SYMPOSIUM "PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH SERENDIPITIES"

Serendipitous Moments in My Early Career

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When I became Head of my department in 2004, I was soon apprised of the fact that to hire well required the conjunction of opportunity and serendipity. Hiring does not just happen in a mechanical or pedestrian manner and serendipity without opportunity, or opportunity without serendipity, meant that hiring was far less likely to succeed. Opportunity is about doors being opened. The Dean has to agree to fund a position and the department has to agree on a field, a rank, and a procedure. Serendipity is about good turns of events falling from the sky without any effort on your part. Someone suitable has to apply and be ready to move, willing to accept the terms of the post, be acceptable to the department, the Dean, etc., etc..

I was lucky that my early career had a couple of serendipitous moments. In 1980, while in my second year as a doctoral student in the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Toronto, I decided to write my dissertation on the Victorian polymath William Stanley Jevons (1835-82). I had already made the unorthodox decision to specialize in the history and philosophy of the science of economics and Jevons seemed like the perfect choice because in addition to his pioneering efforts to mathematize economics, he also wrote at length on the philosophy of science. I soon learned that he was a polymath, contributing to just about every field of science and even writing a treatise on music theory. My choice was bolstered by the fact that no one had yet written a book on Jevons (there are now at least four) and that Professor R.D. Collison Black of Queen's University (Belfast) had spent twenty-odd years tracking down his correspondence and papers. And just as I decided to write the thesis, Black completed the last couple of volumes of his seven-volume set (1972-1981). I was able to purchase the books and make much use of the volumes on which the ink was still drying, so to speak.

Such was my brush with opportunity. The serendipity came in a different form. In the summer of 1982, I spent a few days in Manchester at the John Rylands Library, perusing the archival collection on Jevons (he had been a professor in Manchester in the 1860s). I made careful notes and returned home to Toronto. In one of my regular meetings with my supervisor, Samuel Hollander, I happened to mention the reaction of John Stuart Mill to Jevons's efforts to popularize George Boole's logic. He asked how I knew this and I mentioned a letter I had read in the Jevons archives. He jumped up and said that everyone had been looking for that letter, since the gist was known but the letter had disappeared.

In this way, my first publication fell into my lap. If it had not been for that exchange with Hollander, I might not have known the value of the letter. I was indeed writing about Jevons's logic but I



might have missed the significance. I quickly wrote up a few pages of analysis of the exchange, gained permission to publish the letter, and hence I had my first article in *The Mill News Letter*.

But luck smiled on me again. The year after I finished my thesis a good friend, Judith Margles, called me from New York where she was pursuing a Master's degree in Museum Studies. "Guess what," she said, "a friend of mine, Stephen Novak, a student in history at NYU, has a part-time job in the archives at Seton Hall University. He mentioned that they had just spent \$10,000 purchasing some letters by someone named Jevons. I remembered that you wrote your thesis on him. This may be of interest!"

I wrote to Black immediately and he then broadcast the find in the newsletter for the John Rylands Library. He was delighted to learn that the letters had been found, but also somewhat dismayed at the outright deception that had blocked them from being part of the published multi-volume set. He knew that the letters existed because some of them had been published in a collection edited by Jevons's widow, Harriet in 18xx. Jevons's younger brother Tom had moved to New York City and married into the prominent Seton family. That was the main reason the papers were purchased, although the archivist clearly knew that many of them (92 in total) were by a famous economist. Black had made a trip to New York to find the letters, and met with Jevons's great nephew (Ferdinand Jevons), only to be told that they no longer existed. It turns out they were in Ferdinand's house but he clearly had no intention of releasing them. He had no children and it is unclear what his motives were, but because there had been a hefty amount of mental illness in the Jevons family, Ferdinand may have wanted to protect the family name. In any case, I was lucky to make use of the new set of letters and all the more grateful that I have friends with good memories!

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