

Angus Maddison: Memories of the Life of a Chiffrephile

On 24 April 2010, Angus Maddison, emeritus professor at the Faculty of Economics, University of Groningen, and co-founder of the Groningen Growth and Development Centre, passed away in Paris at the age of 83 years old.

Angus Maddison was born in 1926 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the United Kingdom, and took his studies at Cambridge, McGill and Johns Hopkins. His career as an economist started in the late 1940s. For several decades he worked on a wide range of economic policy and development issues at the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and under a variety of consultancy contracts, for which he spent several years in Pakistan and Ghana. He travelled intensively to many other countries for shorter term projects, including Brazil, Guinea, Mongolia, the USSR and Japan. During the 1970s, back at the OECD, he also worked extensively on topics related to social policy, labour markets and education. These experiences enabled Angus to gain deep insights into the factors that determine economic growth and prosperity.

In 1978, Angus was appointed at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Groningen to dedicate all his time to research of problems of economic growth and development. Following several earlier books he had written on growth and development he published two major monographs in 1982 and 1991 and a seminal article on growth accounting in 1987 in the *Journal of Economic Literature*.¹ After that he focused even more on quantifying economic growth for longer time spans, in some cases back to the year 1 AD, and a broader range of countries. It allowed him to spend more time on the studying of economic history, something he had done earlier for countries like India, Pakistan, Japan, Brazil, and the USSR. In 1998, he published one of the first comprehensive studies of the quantitative macroeconomic history of China from 960 onwards.² During the 2000s he published several updates and extension of his *Historical Statistics on World Population, GDP and Per Capita GDP, 1-2008 AD*, which is also available online from his [homepage](#) at the Groningen Growth and Development Centre website.

In 1994, Angus published his autobiography "[Confessions of a Chiffrephile](#)".³ He invented this term "to characterise economists and economic historians, who, like myself, have a strong predilection for quantification." He trained and guided a dozen of Ph.D students in this tradition, most of whom are still actively working on aspects of this approach in academia or in the policy research world. He also taught and inspired hundreds of students on how to look more broadly at the phenomena of economic growth and development and to go beyond what core textbooks teach. He shook up the profession by provoking them with an estimate of world GDP in the year one. But while many would challenge him on

¹ Angus Maddison (1982), *Phases of Capitalist Development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Angus Maddison (1991), *Dynamic Forces in Capitalist Development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Angus Maddison (1987), "Growth and Slowdown in Advanced Capitalist Economies: Techniques of Quantitative Assessment", *Journal of Economic Literature*, June.

² Angus Maddison (1998), *Chinese Economic Performance in the Long Run*, OECD Development Centre, Paris.

³ Angus Maddison (1994), "Confessions of a Chiffrephile", *Banca Nazionale del Lavoro Quarterly Review*, June.

the reliability of such an estimate, most scholars would trust Angus for giving it the best shot given his deep knowledge and broad experience. Recently an initiative, named “The Maddison Project” has been taken to create a network of scholars to continue the work on world historical macroeconomic statistics in Angus’ spirit. This project, of which Angus has seen the beginnings, characterises his accomplishments: we need a lot of people to continue to do what he has pioneered and realized on his own.

While Angus will be much remembered by the profession for his contribution to the construction of GDP and income data for all countries in the world, his writings are also characteristic of his understanding of the dynamics and sources of growth and development which made a big impact. For example, his characterization of development in terms of secular *phases* rather than the Kondratieff notion of long waves led to a more gradualist interpretation of the diffusion of technology and innovation, and a greater emphasis on “system shocks”. These shocks were in part historical accidents, but their impact was reinforced by changes in expectations, and fashions in economic policy. These views, supported by his strong quantitative backup, challenged scholars who had advanced the notion of a more abrupt “industrial revolution” in the late 18th century, or traditional development economist who supported to Rostovian view of the need for an economic “take-off” to generate growth. Angus was also an early advocate of the need to take economic institutions much more seriously by developing a model that distinguished between proximate (directly measurable economic inputs, such as labour, physical and human capital and land) and ultimate (institutional, political, social and cultural) sources of growth. The complex interaction of these proximate and ultimate sources allowed a multipolar development in Europe in the Middle Ages. He argued that this caused a takeover of leadership from China around 1500, rather than the early 19th century as claimed by others.

Angus’ thinking about the dynamics of growth and stagnation might also turn out useful to better understand the causes of the recent economic and financial crisis. In his latest major work, he even used this framework for a more forward looking approach to 2030, predicting the larger role for China and India in the global economy. He also had a less negative view on the impact of a moderate increase in global warming on economic growth than the predominant viewpoint of, for example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).⁴

Angus’ legacy to the profession is huge. He helped create the Groningen Growth Development Centre (GGDC), a research group at the University of Groningen that focuses on long-term economic growth. The databases created and maintained by Maddison and his current and former colleagues form one of the most important sources for the analysis of long-term economic growth and are used worldwide by scholars and policy analysts. In the 1980s, Angus also started a project on International Comparisons of Output and Productivity (ICOP), which focused on measuring levels of performance from the industry-of-origin side rather than the expenditure side (such as in the International Comparisons Project at the World Bank and Penn World Tables). He also contributed much to the International Association for

⁴ Angus Maddison (2007), *Contours of The World Economy, 1-2030 AD*, Oxford University Press.

Research in Income and Wealth (IARIW) by organizing and participating in meetings and sessions on historical national accounts.

Many of Angus' colleagues have exceptionally favorable memories of his gift to combine work and pleasure in a very natural way. He was a scholar, mentor, colleague and friend, all at the same time. He would welcome newcomers in the field and treat them equally to those with a long experience, as long as they could have a good time together. Many will remember the great moments with him, his wife Penny, and his children at their home in France, or wherever else in the world he would be. Never a dull moment with Angus in the room.

Angus Maddison will be missed. But his legacy will stay, and many will continue the work in his spirit.

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Bart van Ark