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**Book review of: Van den Berg Richard (ed.),
2015, Richard Cantillon's Essay on the Nature
of Trade in General. A variorum edition,
London, Routledge, Routledge studies in the
history of economics, XV-513 p**

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VAN DEN BERG Richard (ed.), 2015, *Richard Cantillon's Essay on the Nature of Trade in General: A Variorum Edition*, London, Routledge, Routledge Studies in the History of Economics, XV-513 p.

Richard Cantillon's *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général* is one of the major works of Enlightenment political economy. It is also one of the most fascinating given the circumstances in which it was published and the extraordinary adventures of the Irish banker who wrote it. Cantillon (ca. 1680-ca. 1734) lived in France for many years, getting rich when Law's system was in effect, before settling in London.⁽¹⁾ The *Essai* is his only work. It was disseminated in Europe through many and highly diverse channels. This variorum edition by Richard van den Berg is an ambitious synthesis of research since the late nineteenth century. It also offers crucial information for retracing the complex history of the work. There are eleven different versions of it, and the labour of comparison here is truly impressive. For the first time, we have an edition that enables us to measure how much of the work was published in English in the mid-eighteenth century, as van den Berg reproduces all English excerpts in their entirety. He also reproduces H. Higgs's 1931 translation⁽²⁾, which, despite its faults, has the virtue of being a complete English version of the treatise⁽³⁾. In his introduction van den Berg retraces the history of each version of the text, pointing out the questions they raise, some of which have never been resolved. Last, he recalls the impact of Cantillon's thinking, whether acknowledged or not, on several economists, including Adam Smith and François Quesnay.

The editio princeps of *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général* is the French version printed in 1755, some twenty years after Cantillon's death, by the Paris bookseller Pierre-André Guillyn. Van den Berg uses this text to identify variants in the other versions⁽⁴⁾. Differences between the three later French editions (two in 1756, one in 1769) are purely stylistic.

We know of three manuscripts of the *Essai*, all in French. The first is complete and kept at the municipal library of Rouen; it was discovered by Takumi Tsuda, who established its precedence over the print edition and published it in 1979. The other two are incomplete, containing only the chapters from Part I; they are among Mirabeau's working papers, preserved at the French National Archives.⁽⁵⁾ Van den Berg lists all significant variants from the print edition found in these

(1) On Cantillon's life see A. E. Murphy, 1986, *Richard Cantillon: Entrepreneur and Economist*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 337 p.; re-edited in 1989.

(2) H. Higgs, ed., 1931, *Richard Cantillon, Essai sur la nature du commerce en général, with an English Translation and Other Material*, London, Macmillan for the Royal Economic Society, VIII-394 p.

(3) Since then a new, high-quality translation has been published; cf. A. E. Murphy, R. R. Cantillon, *Essay on the Nature of Trade in General*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, XXII-153 p.

(4) The printed edition of 1755 was the reference for the modern editions published by INED in 1952 and 1997, in the *Classiques de l'économie* series.

(5) T. Tsuda, ed., 1979, *Richard Cantillon, Essai de la nature du commerce en général. Texte manuscrit de la Bibliothèque municipale de Rouen*, Tokyo, Kinokuniya. For the Mirabeau manuscripts, see F. Quesnay, 2005, *Œuvres économiques complètes et autres textes*, Paris, INED, *Classiques de l'économie*, p. 1241, 1235, and 1313 for a manuscript that outlines a selection of chapters by Cantillon.

three sources. Most turn out to be formal corrections that obfuscate rather than clarify the text. Nonetheless, they give us an idea of the immense amount of work that went into preparing the text for publication. As van den Berg notes, the work primarily involved getting a text full of “Anglicisms” and “imperfect French formulations” into good French. This does not call into question the well-known role of the circle of Vincent de Gournay in publishing the *Essai*⁽⁶⁾.

As there is no manuscript in English, van den Berg judges that the Anglicisms in the Rouen manuscript (of which there are not, in fact, very many) do not clearly indicate which language the text was originally written in, whether it was translated and if so by whom. As he recalls, Mirabeau was the only contemporary to have stated that Cantillon himself had translated a text in “primitive” English for a friend. I would agree with van den Berg when he suggests that the Rouen manuscript is a very rare – if not the only – copy of the manuscript to have circulated at the time. The fact that no other copy was found is not a strong argument, and it is not clear that the one Mirabeau owned for a time was in fact the Rouen manuscript. Indeed, Mirabeau was one of the first persons to read Cantillon, and he drew heavily on his thinking in writing *L'Ami des hommes, ou traité de la population* [*The Friend of Man, or Treatise on Population*] (1756-1757), the first draft of which is an annotated transcription of the first chapter of the *Essai*. The Marquis had received the precious manuscript from a friend that van den Berg has managed to identify thanks to a note by the Abbé Pluquet⁽⁷⁾ in the *Traité philosophique et politique sur le luxe* (1786) that had gone unnoticed: a certain Francois-Olivier de Saint-Georges de Vêrac (1707-1753), whom Mirabeau met around 1737 and with whom he was very close until his death. This interesting discovery considerably increases our knowledge of the initial circulation of Cantillon's manuscript within the continent in the following years.

The *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général* was not published in English until 1931, in H. Higgs' translation. However, entire passages of the work – without mention of their source – were diffused in eleven entries of Malachy Postlethwayt's *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, published in sections from 1751 to 1755. The “Labour” entry is made up almost entirely of such borrowings and is a faithful representation of Cantillon's theoretical advances. Fragments from the *Essai* amount to 1% of the *Dictionary*. Given the publication dates, van den Berg figures that Postlethwayt must have had a (now lost) manuscript of Cantillon's at his disposal, probably in English. One of the primary contributions of this *variorum* edition is to establish that those fragments represent only 36% of the *Essai* and therefore cannot give us an overview of the whole, contrary to what Higgs suggested. Furthermore, there are significant variations between the French edition and the English fragments. According to van den Berg, some

(6) See Murphy, 1986, Ch. 15, and G. Sabbagh, 2016, “Cantillon in French and in English. Two editions by Richard Van den Berg and Antoin E. Murphy: New Facts and Hypotheses”, *Contributions to Political Economy*, 35(1), pp. 91-126.

(7) F.-A.-A. Pluquet, 1786, *Traité philosophique et politique sur le luxe*, vol. 2, pp. 328-329; quoted by van den Berg, p. 9.

passages with no equivalent in French can very probably be attributed to Cantillon. Postlethwayt's manuscript seems to have been considerably different from the French at points. Still, it is difficult to distinguish what can reasonably be thought of as Cantillon's thinking from what is due to his plagiarist.

One of the merits of van den Berg's work is to draw attention to a second English source, one that had very little resonance at the time and long went unnoticed by Cantillon specialists: *The Analysis of Trade, Commerce, Coin, Bullion, Banks and Foreign Exchanges*, written and published in 1759 by one Philip Cantillon, a relative of Richard's. Contrary to Postlethwayt, Philip Cantillon informed his readers that the principles expounded in his book had been drawn primarily from the manuscript of a "very ingenious gentlemen", since deceased and who he left unnamed, and that he himself had adapted them to the situation of the time⁽⁸⁾. Philip Cantillon was close to his cousin Richard's wife at the time Richard died, and so very probably had access to Richard's papers; he may have waited until the executors of Richard's will died before using them. In the 1750s, in fact, he was experiencing financial difficulties and perhaps hoped he could profit from the papers. Forty per cent of Philip's work is borrowed from his cousin's *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général*. Van den Berg stresses the incompleteness of certain theoretical arguments, particularly the section on monetary analysis. He therefore favours the hypothesis that Philip Cantillon was working from an earlier manuscript of the *Essai* than Postlethwayt's or the French copies, though other passages seem to belie this.

Van den Berg's variorum edition provides us with complex material open to several interpretations. Take, for example, Chapter XV of Part I of the *Essai*, "La multiplication et le décroissement des Peuples dans un État dépendent principalement de la volonté, des modes et des façons de vivre des Propriétaires des terres" [in Higgs' translation, "The Increase and Decrease of the Number of People in a State chiefly depend on the taste, the fashions and the modes of living of the proprietors of land"], an essential text for understanding Cantillon's population theory. That chapter is totally absent from Postlethwayt's version. And Philip Cantillon offers a much-diminished version, positioned further along than in the *Essai*, in the general economy section of *The Analysis of Trade*. Did the manuscript he was using have a chapter that was yet to be filled out, or did he choose what seemed to him the most important and timely material? The absence of any reference to Petty noted by van den Berg and which he interprets as evidence of a less developed version could just as easily be interpreted as a sign of the publisher's refusal to reproduce a controversial passage. The question of vocabulary is capital for this chapter. *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général* was written between 1728 and 1733, at a time when the term "population" was used in neither French nor English; it did not come into use before the 1750s. In French Cantillon only used the equivalent expressions of his time. But

(8) Cf the work's subtitle: "Taken chiefly from a Manuscript of a very ingenious Gentleman deceased, and adapted to the present Situation of our Trade and Commerce".

“population” occurs several times in the excerpts published by Philip Cantillon in 1759. This is evidence that Philip knew how to use the word; it is also highly probable that he had modernized his cousin’s vocabulary, as “population” also figures in a digression that Philip himself is believed to have written.

In conclusion, this new edition is a precious, indispensable tool for informed readers. It marks an important phase in research on Cantillon, and there can be no doubt that it will help renew that research.

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