

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

JOHN B. CANNING (1884 – 1962)

John Bennet Canning was born in Huron, Michigan on November 25, 1884. When he was 16 his family moved west, and he completed his high school education in Oklahoma City. In 1909 he attended the University of Chicago, majoring in political economy and graduating in 1913. He continued as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, serving also as an assistant, 1914-15, and instructor, 1915-17. In 1919 he was awarded the Ph.D. degree. Meanwhile, in 1917, he was appointed assistant professor of economics at Stanford University; but before he could take up the appointment the war intervened. He spent the next two years in the U. S. Army as captain and later as major, with service in France in 1918.

Professor Canning started his career at Stanford in the fall of 1919, and he continued as an active member of the Department of Economics until the spring of 1941. He was advanced to associate professor in 1925 and to professor in 1930. In 1941 he also became an associate in the Food Research Institute. In various summers he was a visiting faculty member at the University of California and the University of Washington.

His academic career can conveniently be divided into two parts, roughly corresponding in time to the '20s and the '30s. In the former period, his primary interest was in the economics of accountancy. At Stanford he installed within the economics department a curriculum in accounting as viewed by the economic theorist -- a very different program from the usual curriculum in accounting. This program attracted a small but distinguished group of students who received a rigorous training in both economics and accountancy and many of whom affectionately recall their relations with him.

His research in the '20s also was focused on the combined treatment of the two subjects; and it culminated in 1929 in the publication of The Economics of Accountancy, which broke new ground in the approach to accountancy and which also served to enrich the economist's theory of the business enterprise. The book was given the Beta Alpha Psi (honorary accounting fraternity) award as the most outstanding work in accountancy in 1929; and it continues today to be an authoritative treatment of the subject. During this same period, he supplemented his research and teaching in the economics of accountancy by serving (1921-29) as examiner for the California State Board of Accountancy.

In the second main period of his academic career, the 1930s, while continuing to be actively interested in the accounting program of the department and pursuing further research in the field (e.g., he wrote a brilliant article for the first issue of Econometrica on "A Certain Erratic Tendency in Accountants' Income Procedure"), his interests gradually shifted to other fields of economics. These were mainly areas that had become important as a result of the depression and of the recovery program of President Roosevelt's new administration.

One of these areas was that of fiscal policy. Professor Canning was one of the economists very early to recognize the important part to be played by government spending and an unbalanced budget in reducing the severity of depression and facilitating recovery. In

December 1932 he presented a paper (with E. G. Nelson, a colleague) at the annual meeting of the American Statistical Association on "Budget Balancing versus Trade Stabilization," and followed it with an article in the American Economic Review (March 1934) and testimony before the U. S. Senate Committee on Finance.

Second, he became actively concerned with the system of unemployment insurance and social security that was beginning to emerge at the federal and state levels. He served as a member of the Advisory Committee of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce on Unemployment Reserves and Insurance, and as consultant to the California Joint Legislative Committee on Unemployment Insurance in 1934-35. His research program shifted to concentrate on problems of unemployment insurance and social security. He continued his consulting work in this field in succeeding years, and published several papers bearing on it.

Third, when the California Medical Association became interested in health insurance about 1934, Professor Canning was called upon to serve as a member of the Advisory Board and as economic adviser to the Medical-Economic Survey carried out by a committee of the Association. This work continued in the years 1935-36.

Fourth, late in the 30s, Professor Canning turned to an area of economics which was to engross his full attention for the remainder of his professional career: agricultural policy. As the Second World War became imminent, an interest which he already had in problems of agricultural labor in California led him to a concern with national agricultural policy and the food supply in time of war. Between 1939 and 1941 he wrote a number of papers in this area, participated in two national conferences called respectively by the President and the Department of Agriculture, and served as economic consultant to the Secretary of that Department. Finally, in the spring of 1941 he took leave of absence from Stanford and moved to Washington so that he could devote full time to his work as economic adviser to the Secretary.

This ended his career as a professor of economics and began a new career as a full-time governmental expert. In 1942 he became economic assistant to the Administrator, Agricultural Marketing Administration (U. S. Department of Agriculture), and for the next three years he continued in Washington serving in various capacities with the Department of Agriculture. In 1945, at the close of the war he moved to Berlin to serve as deputy chief of the food and agriculture branch of the economic division of the U. S. Office of Military Government. His principal duties were to serve as the U. S. representative on the Quadripartite Council concerning problems of food and agriculture in the zones of occupation.

In June 1946, at his own request, he retired to emeritus status at Stanford, but he continued in Germany until December 1948, when poor health necessitated his resignation from his governmental post. He returned to Ladera, where he and his wife have lived quietly until his recent death on July 4.

During his years at Stanford previous to the war Professor Canning participated in a variety of extracurricular activities in all of which he took a leading part: the Pacific Coast Economic Association, for which he edited the Proceedings for many years and of which he was president in 1937-38; the Social Science Research Conference of the Pacific Coast, of which he was president in 1936-37; the section on industrial relations of the Commonwealth

Club of California, for which he served as chairman for many years in the 30s; and the Western Farm Economic Association.

Few of his colleagues of the 20's and 30's remain at Stanford. But those who knew him well will recall the fervor and complete concentration with which he attacked every project, the brilliant insight and extraordinary foresight he often showed in his analysis of an economic or political issue, the dispassionate directness with which he stated his views and argued his case—without regard for personal considerations— and the warmth of his loyalty and friendship for those whom he liked and respected.

He is survived by his wife, Dorothy Canning; two sons, John H. Canning, who is with the U. S, Department of State, and Thomas Canning, with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration at Moffett Field; and three grandchildren. The greatest sacrifice of all which John and Dorothy Canning had to make during the war was the loss of their son, James Gilmore Canning, Stanford '42.

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