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ELI HECKSCHER—A MEMOIR

BY M. M. POSTAN

THE death of Professor Heckscher removes from the scene one of the pioneers of the study of economic history, an honorary Vice-President of the Economic History Society in this country, an eminent figure in the academic life of his own and other Scandinavian countries and a close friend and counsellor of innumerable economic historians in Britain and abroad.

Eli Filip Heckscher, a son of a Danish Consul-General in Stockholm, was born in that city on 24 November 1879. He received his university education in Uppsala, where he studied history under Harold Hjarne and economics under David Davidson, one of the founders of modern economics in Sweden, who did much to spread in that country the ideas of Alfred Marshall. In 1907 Heckscher began to lecture on economics in Uppsala, and after two years was appointed professor of economics and statistics in the newly founded Commercial Academy ('High School') in Stockholm. There he taught without a break until 1929 when he was appointed to a 'research chair'. But his withdrawal from teaching was bound to be temporary. During the 1930's he used his great influence to introduce the subject of economic history into the curriculum of the University of Stockholm where he was to teach it until his retirement in 1949. By the time he retired economic history had become a recognized subject in all the Swedish universities and its study had made great and rapid advances.

Although most of his teaching in his younger years and most of his extra-mural activities were concerned with economics (in the early 1920's he advised his government on economic matters and also collaborated in compiling the account of the Swedish economy during the War of 1914-18), he began to specialize in economic history quite early in his career. His study of Napoleon's Continental System was conceived while he was still a student, and a book on this subject was his first important publication. His great study of Mercantilism followed in the 1920's, and the subsequent years of his life were devoted to the writing of his economic history of Sweden from 1521 to 1815, of which the fourth and the last volume was published in 1949. Although this monumental work had to be done almost *de novo*, and to be based largely on his own researches, he also found time to write a book on the Industrial Revolution and a concise economic history of Sweden, of which an English translation is shortly due to appear.

The part which Heckscher played in the development of economic history in his country and abroad corresponded very closely to the role for which he had from the very outset cast himself. He was an economist who had turned economic historian, without forsaking the outlook and the inspiration of economic science. That the problems and methods of modern economics were to some extent beyond his range of sympathies goes without saying. He admired the abilities of the younger representatives of the 'Swedish School' (some of them were his own pupils) and was proud of their international reputation. But it was not for nothing that he abandoned the active pursuit of economic theory in favour of historical researches at the very time when Swedish economists were rapidly moving beyond Marshall, and for that matter beyond Kassel, into the

remote altitudes of post-Wicksellian theory. Their refined and highly artificial syllogisms were not for Heckscher. He preferred to study economic problems in the full context of their political and social environment.

Yet he never became a mere historian. In several articles, in this *Review* and elsewhere, he preached the importance of theory for the understanding of economic history. He valued economic theory for its prophylactic and scavenging action—as a defence against loose thinking and confused terminology—but not for that alone. Both by precept and example he also demonstrated the importance of fitting historical study into a theoretical frame, or, which is the same thing, of concentrating historical research on problems relevant to the intellectual purposes of economic inquiry.

His studies of the Continental System and of Mercantilism are perhaps the most obvious examples of his theoretically minded history. But more discreetly the same attitude has also determined the contents of his great study of Swedish economic history. He practised the lesson he taught, and his example, even more than his exhortations, has helped to mould the study of economic history into the shape it has now taken in this country and elsewhere.