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William Barber
Interview 13 December, 2013
Recorded in his home at Covenant Village, Cromwell, Conn.

Nancy Smith: I hope we can start with how your career turned to Economics, to get us slowly into the Wesleyan scene.

William Barber: I’m a child of the Great Depression; born in 1925 in Kansas, which later became the Dust Bowl. One of the things the people of my generation clearly became aware of was that the larger economy was somehow deranged. That was a very considerable topic for adult discussion, but the juveniles overheard it. What is the New Deal going to do next? What kind of farm program is going to emerge from this? This is a heavily agricultural area.

One of the things that made a big difference to me was that I was a beneficiary of Conant’s policy at Harvard to make Harvard a national university. No longer just a Boston Brahmin fiefdom. He set up a national scholarship program. Both my parents went to the University of Kansas. KU was the family school, and I grew up thinking that I would go there too. In the middle of my senior year, the high school principal collared me and told me about the national scholarship program at Harvard and said I should apply for it. There was a scholarship program at Kansas that I’d always thought of competing for, but the principal said it wouldn’t hurt to take the scholarship exam for Harvard (which was two weeks before the other) and that it would be good to practice for taking the KU exam.

I did that, and I won both.

When I got to Harvard, I found that there were scholarship winners from all over the country--about 35 of us. It was an eye-opener for me. In isolationist Kansas, I had not seen this diversity before.

I was under draft age, but after my first year at Harvard I went into the Army for three years. I had 18 months in the European theater: France and Germany. Five of those months were spent in hospital, recovering from trench foot. According to Stephen Ambrose, the historian of the U.S. Army in World War II in Western Europe, there were 87,000 trench foot casualties in 1944-45. And I was one of them. The legacy of that is my difficulty in walking now.

You ask about getting into Economics.

I came back to Harvard in the fall of ’46. I was a history major, but I also took an introductory course in Economics, which I enjoyed and did well in. My interests lay in
Economics and social issues. In my senior year at Harvard, I was expecting to spend two semesters writing an Honors thesis in History, but was told by the Registrar’s Office that I had enough credits to graduate at mid-year. I said I didn’t want to do that; I wanted to stay in the college and write an honors thesis.

These were the days when they were cramped for beds, with the influx of GI Bill people on top of the normal entry. Everything was double-stacked in the dorms. I say I got kicked out of Harvard, albeit with a degree *magna cum laude*.

Smith: They really made you leave?

Barber: They said, “We are going to graduate you whether you want to or not.” So: I wrote my honors thesis in one semester rather than in two. I applied for a Rhodes Scholarship in December of 1948, competing from Kansas. The chairman of the Kansas Selection Committee was dean of the graduate school at Kansas State University, and his background was in Economics. I won the scholarship, and he knew that I wouldn’t go to Oxford until October, and that I was graduating in January and had a semester gap.

He wrote me a note after I was elected, and asked if I could visit him in Manhattan, Kansas, which was 40 miles from Abilene, the family home. He asked how I would like to be an instructor in Economics for the next semester. I said I hadn’t studied much Economics, but he said “you’ll do all right.” So I became an instructor in Economics with only a BA and only limited experience and only undergraduate courses in the subject. I had to read up on it, and found I really enjoyed this.

When I arrived in Oxford in October, I was supposed to be studying history. I said I’d like to shift to PPE, which was Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. They said “that’s fine,” and I did.

This was a very exciting time to be studying Economics in England: the Marshall Plan, the Nationalization program of the Labour Government. All of the official figures involved in trying to establish these programs appeared in some club or society at Oxford. All of which led me to conclude that this was the direction in which I wanted to go.

After completing the PPE in two years, I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to be an academic or a civil servant, so I decided to expose myself to both. When I first came back from Oxford, Kansas State again offered me a job, as an Assistant Professor, and I had only a BA then in Economics. I took the job, saying I only wanted to stay for a year; I wanted to experience the bureaucracy as well. Which I did. I went to Washington
and worked as an economic analyst, and decided after that that I really preferred to be an academic.

For that I needed a doctorate: I went back to Oxford and did the D. Phil.

Smith: You were a glutton for punishment!

Barber: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Did you know Sheila then?

Barber: Sheila and I had met when I was first at Oxford doing the PPE, and when I went back to do the D. Phil we got married, in 1955.

We were married in London. Her parents were both M.D.s from Scotland, but they lived and practiced in London. We were married in the Scottish Crown Court Church in central London.

Smith: So that brings you up to 1955, and I know you went to Wesleyan in 1957.

When did you first hear about Wesleyan, what attracted you to it? Was there somebody here that made sense to you?

Barber: I was finishing my doctoral dissertation in Oxford in 1957, and ready to tap into the academic labor market in the US. As you can imagine, looking for a job from across the Atlantic had some complications, but the people I’d worked with at Oxford knew various Economists in different schools and wrote on my behalf. The crucial thing was a by-product of my meeting Jerry Meier, who was in the Wesleyan Economics Department. I had known him, not well, but known him in an international economics seminar that he and I attended when I was doing PPE. He was a Rhodes Scholar a year or two ahead of me. He returned and got a PhD at Harvard, started teaching at Williams, then moved to Wesleyan.

Through the Rhodes network, he knew I was looking and wrote to me about the College. I knew nothing about it. He said it was an agreeable environment that had an exciting President who was interested in doing new things. I was glad to hear about it. Then I got a letter from Vic Butterfield, the President, saying a Trustee of Wesleyan named Sutherland, a professor at Harvard Law School, was then on sabbatical in Oxford and would like me to meet him. So Professor Sutherland and I got together. He
told me about the college; he was an alum as well as a trustee, and had a high opinion of it.

I got a trans-Atlantic phone call, which was unusual in those days, from Burton Hallowell, chair of the Economics Department. I had sent my CV and they had checked my references. Burt said he’d like to nominate me for an Assistant Professorship at Wesleyan.

I thought: Nothing to lose by going ahead. It was a very active and creative six weeks or so in the spring of 1957. I got I think six offers from Ivy League schools-- including Harvard, which said in effect: "We can offer an appointment for one year with no prospects." Wesleyan came in with a handsome salary of $5,700--which was $500 more than any of the competitors.

For Sheila and me, with a 1-year-old boy, $500 made a difference in those days. We decided to try Wesleyan: it would give us a base to work from.

Nowadays, this would be the worst kind of old boys' procedure in making appointments. Totally corrupt.

Smith: Yes, but it worked very well. Those were golden days at Wesleyan.

Barber: Oh, yes. We arrived, intending to stay for a year to see what it was like, and it turned out we stayed for a lot longer. And we greatly enjoyed the experience.

Smith: There you were at this astonishingly lively campus. How large was the Economics Department?

Barber: There were six people then. Two of them, C.O. Fisher and Kossuth Williamson, were within two years of retirement. Wesleyan never locked itself into a tight tenure quota, but was still influenced by that style of thinking. Jerry Meier had told me that there were going to be two tenured slots vacated, which would improve prospects for a junior member in a six-member department. The undergraduate population was about 800, all male, and the Faculty was about 100.

The Faculty meetings were held in the President’s office in South College.

Smith: Could they all fit?
Barber: They brought in folding chairs, and it was a bit of a tight squeeze, but everybody was there. And by contrast with what goes on nowadays, attendance at Faculty meetings was virtually 100%.

And if you were absent, it would be noticed. The President sat at his desk and presided. The rest settled into the folding chairs. There was a real sense of a community feeling, it was unavoidable. This certainly contributed--in my judgment--to the attractiveness of the total environment. You knew everybody and it was a group of very able people with quite diverse interests. It was an exciting academic community. People were not only well acquainted with each other; they also cared about institutional values with a high priority on teaching.

This was something I found very attractive. I also wanted to do research, and Wesleyan provided a lot of support over my career. I am forever grateful for that.

Smith: I looked up some of the records in the Archives, and read that you had something like six or more sabbaticals.

Barber: Probably. The teacher-scholar combination is what suited me. Over the years, when Karl Furstenberg, Director of Admissions, would ask me--pretty frequently--to speak to parents of prospective students about what makes Wesleyan distinctive, I said: “We care about a teacher-scholar mix. You can find a lot of places, where the student will never come within 100 yards of a full professor. That isn’t going to happen here. We expect faculty to be actively engaged in creative work or scholarship, and to be on the cutting edge of their fields, but that isn’t good enough on its own. We care that they be excellent teachers.”

Anyway, that’s what I believe in, and the Wesleyan I knew certainly supported this.

Smith: The Colleges were being established at that time, weren’t they?

Barber: They were being started in ’59. I became a tutor in the College of Social Studies. My friend Jerry Meier was very active in setting up the CSS. He was the CSS Economics Tutor in the first year. In the second year, I became a tutor and I enjoyed that.

For one reason, the Oxford experience folded into this very well. When I was a graduate student at Oxford, I had been asked to do some tutorial teaching at my College--Balliol--and this work in the CSS was really building on that.
Smith: I may not ask the best or most appropriate questions about Economics. I know that your specialty is the History of Economic Thought. I understand this was a large area of your academic investigation.

Barber: Yes. When I first got started, my main specialty was the Economics of Underdeveloped Areas. I worked on Economic problems in Central Africa. That’s what I did my doctoral dissertation on, which became a book, and that was something I continued to have an interest in. At that time, nobody else around here had the slightest interest in Africa.

Just to jump ahead. In 1963, I found myself in the job of being Chair of the College of Social Studies. I was still interested in under developed countries, but I had no one to talk to about Africa. As Chair, I had some means of controlling the list of speakers for the CSS. I brought in Jeff Butler, whom I’d known at Oxford. He was then at Boston University. He gave a lecture, and I got all the CSS tutors to be there. They reacted as I assumed they would: They said, “He is great, why can’t we bring him here?” I had him meet Vic Butterfield.

Vic was very impressed. The CSS endorsed him, but while they could endorse, they couldn’t appoint. That had to come through a department. The History Department liked Jeff well enough, but this was still a very Western Civ-centric department, and they weren’t interested in allocating a tenured spot to African History. In fact, one or two members of the department said: “African History? Africa has no history. There are no documents.”

I went back to Vic Butterfield and Vic said: “Well, we’ll have to orchestrate an end run.” He recalled that the charter for the Public Affairs center, which had been set up not too many years before, made provision for the PAC to make faculty appointments.

So Jeff came as a Professor of Public Affairs for the first two years. After that, the History department saw what he did and they happily adopted him.

The other project on the underdeveloped areas side for me, was working with Gunnar Myrdal. I was part of the staff that put together a three-volume study called “Asian Drama.” It’s about Economic prospects in South Asia. I found it very stimulating working with Myrdal, best known in the US for the American Dilemma book on race relations in the US. It came out in the US during the war. He took up underdeveloped areas in the late ‘50s, and was later a Nobel prizewinner in Economics.
I found that a stimulating experience, but I also had an interest in the history of the development of Economic Thought as a by-product of my teaching experience at Wesleyan. I was asked to develop a course in the History of Economic Thought, required of all majors. I enjoyed the subject, but hadn't taken a course in it, so had to read up on it on my own. Which was an advantage, I think, because I didn't inherit any received perspectives on this; I just worked it out my own.

There was a Colloquium in the CSS for juniors, on the History of Political Economy, which I taught for many years. The perspective that made that distinctive produced a book on the History of Economic Thought, that Penguin published in paperback. This went through a number of editions in English, was in print for a long time, translated into eight languages, including a bootleg translation into Persian, and that was all stimulated by teaching at Wesleyan. That became one of my primary research interests for the rest of my career.

A footnote to this: The book came out in 1967; it stayed in print in English until about 2000. Then Penguin decided not to reissue it. The contract stated that if they didn’t do it, all the rights reverted to me. Cecilia Miller, teaching now in the College of Social Studies, knew about this. She wanted to use the book in conjunction with her teaching. Without my having anything to do with it, she approached Suzanna Tamminen, the Director of the Wes Press, to reissue it. She knew I had the rights, and Wes Press decided to do it. I assigned the rights to them, and the book came out in 2008 or 2009. I asked Wes Press if the book was selling; they checked the record and more than 900 copies of a book that is more than half a century old were sold. I find that very gratifying--that it still has a useful life.

Smith: Do you know the year it was re-published?

Barber: 2009

Smith: This is an Oral History of Wesleyan as well. We'll work our way up--or back--to when you were Acting President, but are we still examining the course of your career as an Economist? We should probably continue talking about your particular relationship to the field and faculty of Economics, then circle back to talk about events and upheavals during your years at the University, what you thought about them and how they affected you. So, carry on towards retirement.
Barber: This became one of my major scholarly activities. I did a number of specialist books that I put together on the evolution of Economics and its absorption into the Curriculum in American colleges and universities in the 19th century. Also, there were a number of spinoffs, looking at the role of Economists in government. Then I wrote a book on Hoover and the Economists, and one on Roosevelt and the New Deal Economists.

Then some more narrowly focused on the history of wage-price policy in the Kennedy administration years, the development of energy policies under Eisenhower and Kennedy that were part of a Brookings project. Those were all projects that were exciting to me but not necessarily interconnected.

There are other things that are connected to the field: I was elected President of the History of Economics Society. It is really an international society, but it is run from the US. About ten years ago, I was elected a Distinguished Fellow of the History of Economics Society. But interest in that whole field, which I thoroughly enjoyed, dates back to when I worked it up in order to teach at Wesleyan.

Smith: It was a clear path, it stayed fascinating and absorbing to you. You weren’t darting off to other fields or wishing you might have made a change.

Barber: One thing I am grateful to Wesleyan for is its sympathy for and encouragement of people who want to take unconventional scholarly paths. For example, it worked out that if I’d spent a career at one of the major research universities, that’s the field I would probably have followed for an entire career. Lots of people do that kind of thing, and enjoy it, but my taste was more for working on a variety of different things. You could do that at Wesleyan; you could not do it if you were on the graduate faculty at Yale.

I know a little about Yale because on four different occasions I was invited to moonlight courses at Yale. It’s happily changed a lot now, but when I did this twenty years ago, the Yale faculty of Economics, with two significant exceptions--one being a Nobel Prize winner--the full professors refused to teach undergraduates. They wanted graduate students only. Undergrads were taught by untenured faculty, most of whom sized up the situation as offering no long term prospects at Yale. So--concentrate on getting convertible currency, concentrate on publications. I was invited down there to moonlight because a guy named Joe Peck became Chair of the Department. He was an Oberlin graduate and cared about undergraduate teaching. He saw the split at Yale, and he was hiring people whom he knew were interested in teaching undergraduates--visitors.
Smith: This seems very wasteful.

Barber: Totally wasteful. In fact, after four years, a new provost came in and decreed that this was a wasteful practice, and it was changed. Yale--the Economics Department at least, which is what I know--has integrated tenured with untenured faculty in order to upgrade the instruction. That's slightly off the subject.

We can talk on another occasion about the agitations of the Black Power era. I always thought Wesleyan got a bum rap from the press on that. Our problem was a by-product in large measure of the fact that Wesleyan was ahead of the game in recruiting black students. We had money from “My Weekly Reader” and from a network of contacts through that, so that we decided to allocate about 10% of the entering class to black students.

Because we were ahead for the first 3 or 4 years, we could skim the cream of the crop. They fit in well, they might take a semester longer to adjust, but not more. Other schools got into the act, and started competing for black freshmen. The Admissions Office, in order to reach 10%, knowingly admitted students who were certainly intelligent enough but regarded as high risk. The newer students were more radical, and the seniors, who were doing well, felt that their status in the black community depended on outdoing them.

Smith: I remember talking to Jack Hoy about his efforts. He was very knowledgable, very knowing, and he was enamored of the black culture. I really think he thought that the influence would work the other way--that they would bring excitement into the academic world, not that they would influence it adversely--or politically. Or take over. It was pretty wild.

Barber: Oh, it was!

When I think back on that, and remember some of my students of that time, there were some I would have cheerfully thrown into the Connecticut River. But they now come back as Trustees; a high proportion of them have become enormously successful. Many of the ones I knew have become among the most loyal of loyal alums. They put some distance and perspective behind them, and realize what this experience at Wesleyan has meant to them.

I remember one of them I had had some run-ins with, and he came back 20 years later and gave me a bear hug that I thought was going to crack a couple of ribs!
This was Ed Sanders. He founded a multi-racial, multi-denominational church in Memphis, I think, and is a really exciting person. He was one of the senior generation who became more radicalized than the freshmen, but then came back and tried to curb the more radical elements, put a lid on. What a satisfaction it is to see what a difference it has made to him.

[Interview concluded.]