

## Book Review: The Passionate Economist: How Brian Abel-Smith Shaped Global Health and Social Welfare by Sally Sheard

In this book **Sally Sheard** looks at the life and achievements of former LSE professor Brian Abel-Smith, and at the development of health and social welfare systems since the 1950s. **The Passionate Economist** deserves to find its way on to many people's shelves and reading lists: not just the historians of health and welfare, but anyone interested in questions of social justice and how academics, politicians and policy makers can work together to try to tackle them, writes **Kate Bradley**.

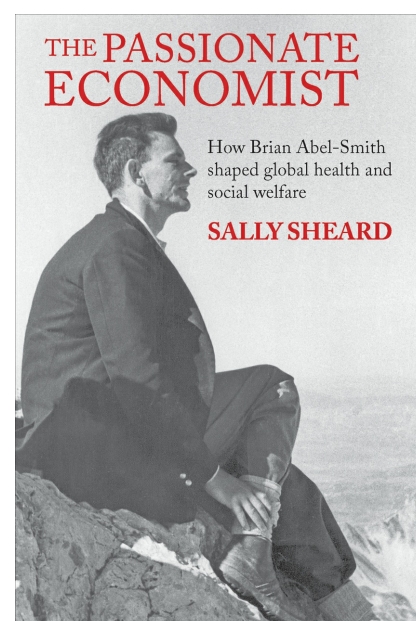


**The Passionate Economist: How Brian Abel-Smith Shaped Global Health and Social Welfare.** Sally Sheard. Policy Press. November 2013.

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Sometimes it pays to start with the epilogue of a book, for this is where I found the question I had been asking myself whilst reading *The Passionate Economist*: 'Is this a biography or a history?' (p.483) Like the author, [Sally Sheard](#), I agreed that this book is both. Sheard engagingly presents the life of Brian Abel-Smith (1926-1996), social policy researcher and government adviser, and, in doing so, throws much needed critical light on a vast swathe of public life in Britain and beyond. Sheard is an historian of health and social policy at the University of Liverpool, with expertise on the development of public health before and after the National Health Service – and so ideally placed to write on the life and achievements of Abel-Smith.

It is this interest in the history of the health services where Sheard and her subject first connect, for one of Abel-Smith's distinctions was his superb *A History of the Nursing Profession* (1960) and *The Hospitals 1800-1943* (1968). For Abel-Smith, understanding the past and how it shaped concerns in the present was vital. Likewise, anyone interested in the future of the NHS, welfare reforms, and social justice would do well to consult this book. Abel-Smith is also an important case of an academic who was deeply involved in the policy process as a special adviser, with campaign groups, and as a talented broadcaster.



Sheard approaches Abel-Smith's life in a conventional, linear fashion, tracing his childhood, his education at Haileybury, then National Service, and his studies in economics at Cambridge. However, the clear breakdown of each chapter on the contents pages and the summary of events at the start of each chapter makes dipping in to episodes or tracing Abel-Smith's involvement with particular institutions or networks easy. As a young man, it was clear that Abel-Smith was a talented economist who had the potential to have a glittering political career. Abel-Smith had a champion in the form of Hugh Dalton, Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1945 and 1947. Abel-Smith was Dalton's favourite to stand for his seat on his retirement in 1957, yet he abruptly withdrew at the last minute, to Dalton's fury. As Sheard demonstrates, Abel-Smith was afraid that being an MP would court scrutiny of his private life by the press; as a homosexual man living at a point in time in which his sexuality was criminalised, such a discovery could have serious consequences. As Sheard shows, Abel-Smith was not deterred from public life: rather, he sought to make his contribution another way.

Abel-Smith was known as one of the 'Titmice', the colleagues of Richard Titmuss, the founder of the field of social policy. Abel-Smith joined the Department of Social Administration at the LSE in 1955. The LSE allowed Abel-

Smith a platform from which to undertake a number of major research projects with Titmuss and Peter Townsend. Here, Abel-Smith worked on the Guillebaud Enquiry into the costs of the National Health Service, and collaborated with Townsend on two projects that would ultimately lead him to a reconceptualization of poverty. Another stand-out project for him was his work for the World Health Organisation, which appealed to his love of travel and further opened up the dimensions of his thinking. In 1967, Abel-Smith was released from some of his duties at the LSE in order to serve as a special adviser to the Labour Party, first to Richard Crossman. As Sheard demonstrates, the primary underpinning of all this work for Abel-Smith was the belief that politicians would take up good, compelling evidence and turn it into policy. As his career unfurled, it would become painfully apparent that evidence alone was not enough: policy formation was at the intersection of public finances and political will. This was not the only development in Abel-Smith's thinking: he progressed from being an economist to thinking, writing and broadcasting from the perspectives of the policy researcher, sociologist and historian. Here are lessons for academics – and policy makers – in how a conversation between Whitehall and the academy can fruitfully take place, just for starters.

Returning to the question of whether this book is a history or a biography, *The Passionate Economist* begins through the meticulous analysis and recreation of Abel-Smith through his personal and professional papers, his publication, broadcasts and interviews. Whilst the detail of Abel-Smith's life is rich and engaging – learning he ran a chain of menswear shops and his flat was featured in *House Beautiful* in 1956 are two such surprises – it is also the insight we gain into the world in which he worked. Sheard takes us through the evolutions of the life of the LSE, from the student revolts of the 1960s to the reworking of academia in the 1980s and 1990s, the formation of Labour policy both in opposition and in power, and the interconnections between groups like the Child Poverty Action Group, the Fabians, academics and the Labour Party. There are a tremendous amount of institutions and mechanisms that form a part of British and global public life which owe a debt to Brian Abel-Smith, and *The Passionate Economist* is as much a history of them as it is a biography.

*The Passionate Economist* deserves to find its way on to many people's shelves and reading lists: not just the historians of health and welfare, but anyone interested in questions of social justice and how academics, politicians and policy makers can work together to try to tackle them.

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