

Memorial Tribute to Cynthia Taft Morris (1928-2013)
Presented to Smith College Faculty by Karen Pfeifer
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Like many women of her age cohort and, indeed of mine, Cynthia Taft Morris' career took twists and turns that juggled, on one hand, her own intellectual curiosity and desire for adventure and, on the other hand, the compromises requisite to the wife of a United States Foreign Service officer and the mother of two children. She was also a woman of indomitable courage and fortitude.

Undaunted by paraplegia inflicted by polio at the age of 14, Cynthia chose to tour Europe on crutches during summer treks in her college years. After graduating from Vassar College in 1949, she earned a tutorial-form master's degree in labor economics at the London School of Economics, having decided that the US system of courses and exams was just too boring to endure for two more years. Then, instead of returning to the United States, she went on to work in Paris for two years for the Mutual Security Agency under the Marshall Plan. Her job entailed gathering research data for an evaluation of the Marshall Plan's impact on the living standards of workers, for which she traveled to five countries, "hopping on and off buses, escalators and subways on her crutches."¹

Cynthia's command of European languages – she was fluent in German and French, conversant in Italian, and taught herself to read Dutch and Spanish – plus her LSE degree in labor economics and her work in Paris won her a research associate job with Lloyd Reynolds upon her return to the United States in 1953. Reynolds was a pioneering labor economist who encouraged her to enter the Ph.D. program in economics at Yale and who valued her work so highly that he made her co-author of the book they produced from that research. She took her Ph.D. in economics at Yale in 1959.²

Meanwhile, however, Cynthia had married Donald R. Morris and moved with him to Harvard, where he attended graduate school. She wanted to teach and persuaded the head of the economics department to hire her as an adjunct, on the irreproachable logic that because "Yale did not permit women to corrupt their young men by teaching them," Harvard should do it first.³

In 1960, Cynthia moved with her newly-minted foreign-service officer husband first to Geneva, where she worked for the Economic Commission of Europe, a core institution of what would become the European Union, and then on to Beirut for two years. She talked herself into a job at the American University of Beirut teaching history of economic thought. It was the experience of reading and preparing this course, and her complex experience comparing economic "development" in Lebanon with various European countries, that shaped her appreciation for the

¹ Morris, Michele Taft, August 2013, *Obituary of Cynthia Taft Morris*.

² Hauptert, Mike, 2007, *Interviews with Cynthia Taft Morris*, Cliometric Society, pp. 1-2.
<https://eh.net/files/Cliometric%20society%20interview%281%29.pdf>

³ Morris, *op cit*.

wide range of possible visions, theories and understandings in the field of economics, and her sense that there were no single universally correct answers to economic questions.⁴

Cynthia hailed from a famous Ohio Republican family, at a time when both the Republican Party and the politics of Ohio were rather different from what we know today. Her grandfather, William Howard Taft, was President of the United States and her cousin Robert Taft was a two-term state governor. As the mayor of Cincinnati, Cynthia's father, Charles Phelps Taft, became famous for cleaning up corruption and running public works programs during the Great Depression, leading to *Fortune* magazine's accolade that Cincinnati was the "best managed big city in the country."⁵

Given this background it may come as a surprise to learn that Cynthia defined herself as a European-style social democrat, and took pride in her reputation as a "radical" student at Vassar. She attributed these inclinations to the counterbalancing influence of her mother, "a Christian socialist pacifist,"⁶ which may account for her lifelong dedication to political, social and economic equality within the realistic confines of the capitalist economies she studied.

Cynthia called herself "the maverick in the middle" in the field of economics. The professional work for which she became famous was a long-term series of joint projects with Irma Adelman, funded by the rare boon of four National Science Foundation grants. The work resulted in three widely respected books over 20 years. Based on detailed and precise gathering of data for, ultimately, over 100 countries, this body of work showed the critical influence of political and social institutions on the economic transformation of societies in variegated historical settings. Most important, Adelman and Morris challenged the reigning neoclassical models that assumed the benefits of growth would automatically trickle down in a market economy, arguing instead that distribution of benefits was the contingent outcome of the particular institutions and historical setting that framed growth.⁷

Having moved with her husband again, Cynthia found a comfortable tenured niche in the economics department at The American University in Washington DC from 1964 to 1983. In the 1970s, the economics faculty at AU, like its counterpart at UMass-Amherst, evolved into a heterodox department where a wide range of economic visions and types of research was encouraged. Cynthia was the perfect "maverick in the middle" for such a setting. The graduate students came from many countries and backgrounds and included not only "a brilliant batch of white males" but also "a few talented and diverse women students tied down in Washington by family obligations."⁸ Leaving aside the "talented" adjective, I was one of those errant female students, who, like Cynthia herself, had already had a twisting career, who had moved, young child in tow, with her then-husband to Washington for his work, and who had entered the Ph.D.

⁴ Hauptert, *op cit.*, p. 4.

⁵ Carter, Susan, 10 Aug 2013, *An Account of Cynthia Taft Morris's Presidential Address to the Economic History Association, Hyatt Regency Hotel, Cincinnati OH, September 1994.*
<https://eh.net/files/Cynthia%20Taft%20Morris%20EHA%20Presidential%20address%283%29.pdf>

⁶ Hauptert, *op cit.*, pp. 6-7.

⁷ Hauptert, *op cit.*, pp. 4-5, 7-8.

⁸ Hauptert, *op cit.*, p. 5.

program with the purported head start of a master's degree earned elsewhere (that is, the hard way).⁹

During my last year at AU, I had the privilege of working as Cynthia's research assistant for the third book she wrote with Irma Adelman. This process taught me how to dig deep to find and organize original data and how to weave institutional research and a historical perspective in with economics more narrowly conceived. Cynthia served as my dissertation chair, reading everything I wrote quickly and with sharp but supportive criticism. She encouraged me to carry through on my plan to do research in Algeria, a country I had never been to before, to struggle through many months of language study so that I could survive in a different society, and, most important, to gather my own fresh data and to offer an original take on a critical question about agrarian reform in economic development. She was delighted when I was hired at Smith College in 1979, an institution that she saw providing a progressive education to women as her own Vassar College had done for her.

Cynthia was recruited to Smith College by President Jill Ker Conway and Dean of Faculty Frances Volkmann in 1983 to become Charles N. Clark Professor of economics. Never shying from a harsh truth, Cynthia called this a "pure affirmative action hire" because it came at a time when there were few senior women professors in the discipline and when no woman had been tenured in the Smith economics department for over two decades.¹⁰ She relished teaching women students in yet another heterodox department and served as inspiration and support to me and several other younger female assistant professors who were hired and came up for tenure in the 15 years before she retired in 1998.

There are many anecdotes illustrating Cynthia's indomitable courage and fortitude, but I will finish by reciting two that also show her sense of humor and her grace under pressure. After her return to Washington in 1998 as a Distinguished Economist in Residence at American University, she routinely rolled herself to campus in her wheelchair wearing a sign that read, "Don't push me, I'm working out."¹¹

On the occasion of her presidential address to the staid and sober Economic History Association in 1994 at a convention hotel in Cincinnati, Cynthia had to compete with a Polish-style band playing polka music, with tubas blaring and hearty foot stomping, on the other side of a thin partition. As the music got more raucous toward the end of her talk, she delivered her concluding sentences by belting them out to the tune of the song the band was playing. The economic historians leaped to their feet with a thunderous ovation and several boisterous rounds of "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow."¹²

⁹ Another fond account of Cynthia's life and work as a teacher, researcher and colleague by one of those few women students is Sue Headlee's *Remembrance of Cynthia Taft Morris*, August 2013, <https://eh.net/files/Remembrance%20of%20Cynthia%20Taft%20Morris.pdf>

¹⁰ Haupt, *op cit.*, p. 6.

¹¹ Morris, *op cit.*

¹² Carter, *op cit.*