The Institutional Economics and Public Service of Edwin A. Elliott[1]

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[1]This article is dedicated to the faculty who were the most influential in my academic career at the University of Tennessee (BA, MA, and PhD), all of whom were products of or directly associated with the same Cactus Branch of American Institutionalism as Edwin Elliott: William E. Cole (1931-2011), Hans E. Jensen (1919-2008), Anne Mayhew (1936), and Walter C. Neale (1925-2004). Without them, I would not have fallen in love with economics.

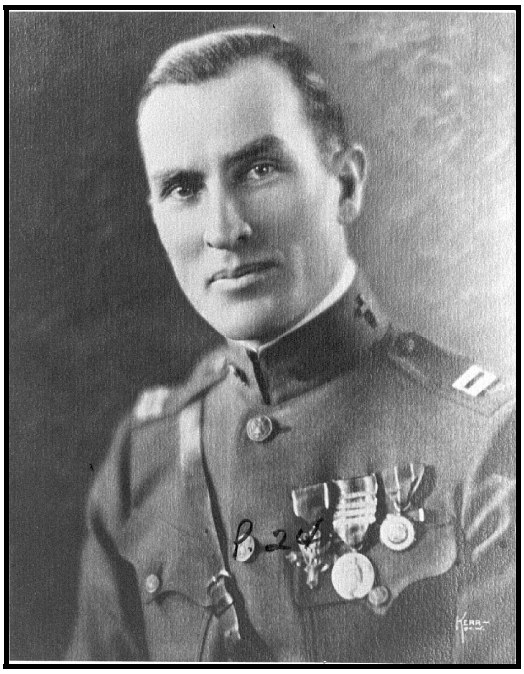

Figure 1: Edwin A. Elliott, TCU Digital Repository.

Edwin A. Elliott was a product of the Texas school of Institutionalism, having earned his PhD there in 1930.[2] He had a storied career that included being a decorated veteran of WWI, student body president and later chair of the economics department at Texas Christian University (TCU), and regional director of Franklin D. Roosevelt's (FDR) National Labor Relations Board. A lifelong supporter of progressive causes, he was, by all accounts, an inspirational and influential individual. And yet despite this, he is all-but-forgotten–even on the campus of the university where he served in leadership roles during both his undergraduate days and as a member of the faculty.

Edwin Elliott's fate is typical of that of Institutionalist economists over the 1930s and 1940s. The ironic result of their willingness to become public servants–to use their expertise to design and guide policy help the US out of a catastrophic economic and social disaster–was a loss of power and prestige within the discipline. Their absence in the academy and the classroom was, while not the only factor that led to the resurgence of the Neoclassical mainstream, an important contributing factor. Telling his story therefore offers both an opportunity to recognize the achievements of a kind, inspiring, and conscientious

[2]I am indebted to Ronnie Phillips for pointers during my research. I am also very thankful to Janet Caggiano (Edwin Elliott's granddaughter), Chris Falgiani (Edwin Elliott's great-grandson), and Drs. Mark and Linda Wassenich (sponsors of the Wassenich Award for Mentoring referenced later in the paper) for their insights.

man and to increase our understanding of the events that led to Institutionalism's diminished influence in both theory and policy.

The paper will proceed as follows. The next section offers a biographical sketch that includes details regarding his TCU and public service careers and gives insight into his personality, values, and ambitions. Following that, Elliott's research is examined for Institutionalist signposts. Then there is a brief discussion of the factors contributing to his disappearance from Institutionalist history. Conclusions follow.

Biographical sketch

Edwin Alexander Elliott was born in Troy, Texas, on August 18, 1891, the second child of Owen Carpenter Elliott (1854-1941) and Mary Ellen Paull (1855-1938). His parents were both originally from Cumberland, Kentucky and were married in 1882 in Texas. The 1900 census shows Owen as a physician in Limestone County, just east of Waco, with a wife and two children. Owen served as a physician for forty years, passing away on January 2, 1941 (Austin American Statesman Jan 3, 1941: 8). (Mary) Ellen had died on March 11, 1938.

Edwin Elliott went to primary and high school in Limestone and McLennan counties and first appears in the TCU Yearbook in 1917, where he is included in the freshman class picture. Studying to be a Disciples of Christ minister, he left school after the US became involved in WWI and entered the Army (his draft card indicates that he registered on June 5, 1917, two months after the declaration of war). He earned the Distinguished Service Cross on October 12, 1918 (Hudson and Rogge 1986: 35). The official citation reads:

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of

> Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Sergeant Edwin A. Elliott (ASN: 556067), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in action while serving with Company E, 39th Infantry Regiment, 4th Division, A.E.F., north of Nantillois, France, 12 October 1918. An ammunition detail having failed several times to carry ammunition over a barraged zone, Sergeant Elliott voluntarily gathered and conducted an ammunition detail over 3 kilometers under extremely heavy artillery and machine-gun fire to the front line. In advance of his men he dragged a full box of Springfield ammunition for over a kilometer and distributed it to the front line. Later, he volunteered to carry, and carried, a message back to regimental headquarters (Hall of Valor Project 2024).

That he earned this medal for an act of heroism related to helping comrades rather than taking lives is completely in character. His personal philosophy is further reflected in a letter he sent home while still in France (subsequently shared in the student newspaper, the TCU Daily Skiff):

> Jan. 17, 1919, Base Section Number 5, A.P.O. 716, Ft. Bougen.
>
> Dear Friend:
>
> Many months have gone by since last we met. In fact just twelve months to the day. I have thought of you often and prayed for you. I have been thru three battles in five fronts into battle position,–Chateau Thierry, Vesle River, St. Mihiel, Argonne and St. Mihiel towards Metz. I am unhurt, and have been over the top and into no-man's land. Enough of this, but I just wanted you to know that these things have caused the deepest sense of

gratitude to God to be eternally instilled into my being. *I love friends, loved ones, and home more and have a deepening feeling of comradeship with my fellowman.*

As I marched out of the Argonne a tired battle-worn Sergeant Co. E, 9th infantry, my commission as Chaplain, 1st lieutenant, was handed me. I am now Camp Chaplain for 500 men at this fort. I am serving the men who are on their way home.

God bless you all; I hope you are well and happy. Love to all of you. Ever yours,

Edwin A. Elliott (emphasis added; TCU Daily Skiff February 24, 1919)

After the war, Elliott returned to TCU to complete his Bachelor of Arts degree (1923) and a Bachelor's in Business Administration (1924) (Hudson and Rogge 1986: 35). He was by all accounts extremely active on campus: a member of the Add-Ran Literary Society, Add-Ran Student Advisory, President of Add-Rans, General Secretary of the YMCA, the Dean of Men, Vice President of the TCU Oratorical Association and President of the State Oratorical Society, Horned Frog (TCU yearbook) Staff, and finally President of the Senior Class.[3] From 1917 through 1924 (his undergraduate years), he appears in no fewer than 69 separate issues of the school newspaper. Again reflective of his personal values is a story from March 18, 1921, where he offers his support for a humane change in the nature

[3]The name "Add-Ran" (today "AddRan") is both derived from a combination of those of the founders of TCU, Addison and Randolph Clark, and taken directly from that of the oldest son of Addison, Addran Clark (sadly, Addran contracted diphtheria at age three and did not survive). Today, AddRan is the name of the college of liberal arts at TCU (the one in which the Department of Economics his housed). In Elliott's time it was a dormitory.

of the rituals used to initiate new students:

> Edwin A. Elliott, who is meeting with great success as supervisor of the men's dormitory, believes that modern thought demands the abolition of the ancient and indiscriminate clashes which have marked college activities from time immemorial, and is of the opinion that the new plan will have the desired effect in promoting a wholesome class spirit (TCU Daily Skiff March 18, 1921: 2).

Combat veteran and ordained minister Elliott had little patience for juvenile traditions that encouraged a “spirit of retaliation which places all class events in jeopardy and which has always resulted in considerable damage to property, clothing, and the persons of those who participated” (TCU Daily Skiff March 18, 1921: 2).

One of the lasting contributions he made as a student was spearheading the creation of a veterans’ memorial at TCU. In his letter to alumni, written as Chairman of the Memorial Committee, he wrote:

> The Senior Class of 1923 is sponsoring the erection of a beautiful arch which you have no doubt often visualized as a most fitting form for such a memorial. This arch is dedicated to all who served, and particularly to Aubrey Cooper and Milan Little, who gave their lives (Elliott 1923).

While the arch eventually became columns as University Drive was widened and TCU altered and expanded the memorial, it still exists today (Fort Worth Star Telegram Jun 30, 1948: 2). Indeed, it is about to be expanded once more (TCU News May 3, 2024).

After graduation, Elliott went on to earn a master’s degree in economics at the University of California at Berkeley (1925). He had married Ora Eva Leveridge when still

an undergraduate and their first child (Nina John) was born while the couple was living in California.[4] They soon returned to Fort Worth, however, and Elliott started teaching at TCU in 1926. He was initially listed as Assistant Professor of Political Science and Economics (1925-6), then Assistant Professor of Economics (1926-7), and then additionally as Head of the Economics Department starting in 1927. He took a leave of absence in 1929 and came back to TCU in 1930 with a PhD from the University of Texas (at which point he was listed as Professor).

Once back at TCU, he very quickly returned to the pace he had been maintaining as a student. As testament to this, students dedicated the 1929 Horned Frog Yearbook to Dr. Elliott:

> We are Youth, in whom there is a kindred feeling for those young in spirit and in years who lead the way to taking place beside Experience. As Bacon counselled: "A man that is young in years may be old in hours, if he have lost no time." Such a man we wish to honor; one who has lived for his Alma Mater, as student, as soldier, as teacher. Of him we can say, "And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly, teche." Whom T.C.U. has claimed, we of the class of 1929 acclaim; and so we dedicate this, our treasury of memories, to EDWIN A. ELLIOTT (TCU Yearbook 1929).

The dedication was kept secret until the announcement on the morning of Wednesday,

[4]Elliott's wife, too, appears to have been very active on campus. Her senior yearbook lists her as an English major with activities including the German Society, secretary of the YMCA, secretary of the Honor Council, member of the Press Club, Secretary-Treasurer of the Senior Class, and member and officer of women's organizations. Her senior quote was: "The best of her is diligence" (TCU Yearbook 1917: 4).

May 29, 1929 (Fort Worth Star Telegram May 29, 1929: 3). It was reported that “The dedicating of the Horned Frog to Prof. Edwin A. Elliot, it seems, could not have pleased the student body one iota more” (TCU Daily Skiff May 31, 1929: 1).

The onset of the Depression was significant for Elliott’s career in two ways. First and most immediate, TCU cut faculty salaries:

> A new reduction of 25 per cent in faculty salaries was announced this week by the administrative committee and the board of trustees. This cut comes as the third of a series amounting to approximately 43 per cent reduction from the salaries paid in 1930 (TCU Daily Skiff Nov 4, 1932: 1).

This led Elliott to “hit the lecture circuit,” which raised his national profile (Hudson and Rogge 1986: 35). Second, the resulting notoriety (he was an excellent speaker) meant that once the FDR administration began to take action to fight the collapse, Elliott was known to them and was tapped to be the Oklahoma-Texas regional director of the National Labor Relations Board (Washington Herald Sep 12, 1934: 1). He held this position from 1934 to 1961 (their second child, Edwina “Wini” Eileen, was born in 1934).

The National Labor Relations Board was established as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act (1933) and was created in an effort to protect labor’s right to organize. After a bit of a false start, the “new” National Labor Relations Board was reborn under the National Labor Relations Act (1935). Its goals were:

> (1) the reduction in disruptions to interstate commerce caused by industrial conflict between employers and labor organizations, (2) the encouragement of the collective bargaining process, (3) the encouragement of industrial democracy, and (4) the facilitation of employer-employee conflict resolution

(Zimarowski 1989: 48).

Elliott was Regional Director of the Sixteenth Region based in Fort Worth, Texas and responsible for New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. He explains his duties in this lengthy passage from *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly,*

> When a charge alleging an unfair labor practice within the meaning of the Act is filed by a complainant in a regional office, the Regional Director examines it for sufficiency, dockets it, acknowledges receipt of it, and notifies the respondent. The case is then assigned by the Director to field examiner who investigates the charges, – contacting both the respondent and the complainant. The examiner obtains all details of the circumstances affecting the case and all facts. These facts, as well as the points of view, are gained both from the employer and from the Union or from individuals. These investigations are scientifically and impartially made. The first objective of the examiner is to gain all the facts from all parties. If the facts indicate that an unfair labor practice is being committed by the employer, the examiner seeks to gain a settlement in compliance with the law. Fifty-five percent of the cases have been thus settled. If the facts reveal that the charges are unfounded, or interstate commerce is lacking, then the Union is asked to withdraw the charges. Twenty-four percent of all cases have been withdrawn. If the Union refuses to withdraw the charges in cases where the facts do not reveal an unfair labor practice, the case is then dismissed. Sixteen percent of all cases have been disposed of in this manner.
>
> Where a case, upon investigation, is found to represent an unfair labor

practice and the agents of the board are unable to obtain compliance with the law, a complaint, upon authority of the Board, is issued by the Regional Director and a hearing is called before a Trial Examiner appointed by the Board. All parties are given opportunity to be heard and present witnesses. The Trial Examiner, after reviewing the transcript of the hearing, makes his Intermediate Report, to which either or both parties may file exceptions, with which the Board may agree or disagree. If the Report of the Examiner finds an unfair practice, the Regional Director of the Board again attempts to get compliance. If this fails, then the Board makes its finding of fact, and if the law has been violated a decision and order is issued. Again the Regional Director attempts to get compliance to accomplish the purposes of the Act and save expensive court procedure. It is only after all these efforts have failed that the Board resorts to court action (Elliott 1938: 313-4).

In that same piece, Elliott argues that the Board had been tremendously successful in pursuing its charge:

> Of the cases coming before it, 55 percent, covering 1,247,878 persons, were settled amicably by agreement. Sixteen percent were dismissed and 24 percent withdrawn. This left only five percent that to go to formal hearing and eventual court review. In only two percent of the cases was the Board's power exercised in the issuance of "cease and desist" orders against employers. Of the strike cases coming before the Board, 76 percent were settled. Five hundred and eighty strikes, involving 149,948 workers, were averted. The Board held 1,280 elections, in which 450,842 valid ballots were

> cast. The few cases of open controversy which make the newspaper headlines are through a tiny minority. The Board has done a workmanlike job in removing thousands of difficulties that the public seldom or never hears of (Elliott 1938: 312).

He appears frequently in newspapers nationwide during this period as he prosecuted the duties assigned to him.

All was not clear sailing for Elliott, however. In July 1940, accusations were forwarded to Martin Dies, a Texas member of the US House of Representatives and chair of the Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities from 1938 to 1944, naming Elliott as a member of the Communist Party. This was, of course, a common experience for Institutionalists during this period (Clark 1995: 4). What was less common was Dies coming out in support of the accused–indeed, he represented Elliott as counsel (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Dec 13, 1949: 1). Perhaps Elliott's status as a war hero spared him, but in any event he received strong support from the erstwhile communist hunter:

> "I had my investigators make a thorough check on these charges and they found that the informants were unreliable and the charges without any foundation," Dies said. "My testimony today is based upon these findings in 1940 for we believe that these same informants have made charges out of malice. In 1940 the same informants made a great many other charges against other persons which we also found baseless–some of their charges involved all of TCU" (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Dec 13, 1949: 1).

Those informants were never named.

Elliott retired from the National Labor Relations Board in 1961. In his speech after

the dinner given in his honor, he reflected on his years of work as regional director:

> In my years of experience with labor and management groups, I have come to know of their basic human decency. In decent industrial-labor relations both groups know that peace rests upon freedom, not restraint; upon equality, not subservience; upon cooperation, not domination; upon mutual respect for freedom of thought and for the worth of the individual. I know labor and management have more in common than not. The interests and wants of the two, where intelligently expressed and unselfishly considered, converge and are not in conflict, and the public interest is served (Elliott 1961: 5).

He also referenced contemporary extremist pressures and cautioned against listening to either the far right or the far left.

Elliott's support for the Democratic Party and democratic causes continued through and beyond his work at FDR's National Labor Relations board. He, for example, attended a rally for presidential candidate John F. Kennedy in Fort Worth in 1960, commenting, "I admire him greatly and want to hear a sincerely devoted person speak" (Tinsley 1960: 5). He later penned a letter to the editor, lamenting Kennedy's assassination and hoping that it taught us that "life is at its worst when anger, hatred, cynicism and evil impulses obsess the human mind" (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Letters Dec 3, 1963: 22). He was a frequent letter writer, contributing pieces in favor of Medicare (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Feb 20, 1964: 8), Democratic Senator Ralph Yarborough (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Letters Apr 17, 1964: 6), the Great Society program (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Letters Jan 30, 1966: 54), Jimmy Carter and reduced arms trade (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Letters Jun 24,

1977), and the Humprhey-Hawkins full-employment bill (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Letters Feb 1, 1978: 28). He also called for Nixon's impeachment (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Letters Oct 29, 1973: 12). Elliott was particularly vocal in his support for Frances Farenthold in her 1972 Texas gubernatorial campaign, writing letters to both the TCU Daily Skiff (Apr 7, 1972) and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram (Letters March 22, 1972: 40; May 2, 1972: 10). His name also appears on a Farenthold for Governor ad in the TCU Daily Skiff (April 27, 1972: 3). That ad states that she is in favor of:

- abolishing free speech restrictions on college campuses
- lowering marijuana possession penalty to a misdemeanor
- full financial disclosures by state officials
- saving the environment
- a corporate profit tax
- day-care centers
- removal of spending ceiling on Aid to Dependent Children
- other progressive measures (TCU Daily Skiff April 27, 1972: 3)

In addition to letter writing, the retired Elliott was a delegate to the Texas State Democratic Convention (Fort Worth Star-Telegram May 15, 1966: 8), served on a government panel to study Puerto Rican federal minimum wage rates (The Miami Herald Jan 16, 1963: 71), worked as an independent labor arbitrator (Hudson and Rogge 1986: 35), and continued to speak to civic groups and university audiences.

Edwin Alexander Elliott passed away on August 5, 1986 in Danbury, Connecticut, where he had moved to be closer to his daughter, Edwina. Falling short of his 95th birthday by thirteen days, he had, by all accounts, lived a very full life. He had been a minister, a

campus leader as both a student and professor, a war hero, a dedicated public servant, a husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, and an inspirational speaker, leader, and mentor. Throughout he was guided by his strong Christian faith, which for him manifested itself as: tolerance, a belief in democracy and basic human decency, a love of humanity (especially those least able to fend for themselves), and the conviction that the greatest calling of all is to serve others.

Institutionalist economics

Although he did not publish extensively, it can be demonstrated that Edwin Elliott was an Institutionalist. Specific influences from his undergraduate days are difficult to discern as few records have survived, but take for example the composition of his University of Texas dissertation committee: C.A. Wiley (chair), Edmund T. Miller, Robert H. Montgomery, George W. Stocking, C.P. Patterson, and O. Douglas Weeks.[5] These were core members, along with Clarence Ayres, of the Cactus Branch of Institutionalism (Phillips 1996). Their impact on him–especially that of Wiley–is evident in his dissertation and later publications and career choices.

> Elliott acknowledges Wiley's mentorship in the preface to his dissertation:
>
> Dr. C.A. Wiley, under whose direction this study was been prepared, aided in the formulation of the framework; furnished, through his lectures on agricultural economics, much background; and responded to numerous calls for suggestions with patience and interest (Elliott 1930: vi).

[5]One additional signature is illegible but may be M.S. Handman.

C.A., or "Alton," Wiley was a product of the Wisconsin tradition, which was characterized by the German Historical Approach; "the Turner thesis; the Progressive philosophy that the government needed to attack social and economic problems, including problems in the use of natural resources; and the idea that intellectuals should devote themselves to affairs of importance to people outside of the academy, serving in government offices when necessary" (Vaughn 1996: 115; quote from Kirkendall 1963: 206-7). Each of these shows up in Elliott's work.

Beginning with the first, although Institutionalism is not, as is sometimes argued, derived from the German Historical Approach, aspects of the latter like the rejections of a prioris and economic "laws" and the assumption that culture is core are nevertheless compatible (Mayhew 1987: 980). We find these in Elliott's work. His dissertation, for example (entitled *An Economic Survey of a Texas Cotton Plantation as to Tenantry, Tenancy, and Management*), and the two publications based on it (Elliott 1931 and 1933) are primarily descriptive and rely on questionnaires and "observation and hours of questioning during many visits to the estate" (Elliott 1930: iv).[6] Rather than opening with premises like utility and profit maximization, agent rationality, perfect information, and other Neoclassical concepts, he set out to discover (and not assume) the rules of the game. His strategy was to break plantation members into racial and national categories; make informed generalizations regarding the cultural characteristics of each; and consider these

[6]Typical of the Edwin Elliott described in the biographical section, in the preface he apologizes to his "little daughter, Nina John" for lost play hours (Elliott 1930: vii). He also thanks his wife for completing "the tedious task of compiling and consolidating the data" and for "invaluable assistance in the selection of the material utilized" (Elliott 1930: vii).

in the context of their economic standing as evidenced by their income, spending, farm size, and productivity. As Elliott states in the latter piece: “I am, however, one of those who believes that human nature is not something with which we are born, but it is that which comes to us from our environment” (Elliott 1936: 196).

With respect to his study of the plantation, his conclusions were dismal:

> From these studies of the incomes of the tenants, which also reflect the income of the landlord, it can clearly be seen that variation in income is common to both. It is obvious that these variations work hardships on both. To one it is a struggle for a standard of living, or all too often a struggle for mere subsistence (Elliott 1931: 429).
>
> In conclusion, it should be said that in a situation where the income per family ranges little above $1,000 a year, even during the “good years,” where capital accumulations amount to an approximate figure of $850, and where credit needs are met at an interest rate approximating one-fourth of the amount borrowed, it is hardly probable that such a system is satisfying, and to the tenantry that are a part of it, the so-called American standard of living is existent not even in the realm of “things hoped for” (Elliott 1931: 435).

This, is consistent with the position taken by Elliott’s dissertation coordinator. Wiley had worked extensively in the area of agricultural economics and had been arguing for some time that there were too many farmers. He believed that in part, this was because policy had been incorrectly aimed at preserving their way of life rather than integrating that sector into the larger economy and focusing on sustainable means of producing their output (Vaughn 1996: 125). Elliott’s portrait of this Texas cotton plantation is therefore both

representative of the Wisconsin historical approach and in harmony with his mentor's evaluation of the farming sector in the US.

The second characteristic of the Wisconsin school mentioned above was the Turner thesis, which argues that the frontier nature of the colonization of the North American continent created a unique culture that was a clear break from its European roots.[7] This culture was purportedly more egalitarian, pragmatic, industrious, inventive, and meritocratic. This idea became extremely popular and was picked up on by Institutionalists, too:

> There is, for example, a fairly common view that the conscious process through which the United States was created, the very low population/land ratio, and the social conditions associated with frontier life were what gave rise to the rather special intellectual tradition of which institutionalism is one part (Mayhew 1987: 985).

While it is questionable as to whether or not the United States truly met the conditions suggested by the Turner thesis, particularly that associated with the existence of free land, it has nevertheless held sway in Institutionalism (Mayhew 1987: 986).

The Turner thesis shows up in a number of places in Elliott's scholarship, first in the introduction of his 1933 *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* piece based on his dissertation:

> In the history of the early settlement and development of the territory today

[7]This, of course, refers to the European settling of the continent and not to the indigenous people who were displaced by them, quite often with little concern for their customs, cultures, or, indeed, lives.

> included within the boundaries of the state of Texas, the empresario stands out as the chief figure. In the second decade of the nineteenth century especially did he play the leading role. He came to an uninhabited, often to an unexplored, wilderness or prairie, which, if his work was successful, he converted into a peopled settlement. History has recorded the story of the prowess of these first developers of the country, and the people of the twentieth century recognize them as contributors to civilization (Elliott 1933: 1).

The idea that settlers came to "an uninhabited, often to an unexplored, wilderness or prairie" fits perfectly with Turner's thesis and that Elliott chose to introduce his research with this passage is telling.

He returns to this theme in a 1936 piece entitled "Some Aspects of Economic Chaos–And Suggested Remedies." There, he opens with the contention that "A series of frontiers has characterized the economic development of the United States" (Elliott 1936: 191). He continues:

> The first of these was the frontier of geography. For decades and generations we expanded westward, bringing into our command the rich and fertile lands of that area, suited to farming and grazing. This land area, for these decades, provided escapes from depressions for the earlier Americans (Elliott 1936: 191).

He adds frontiers of natural resources and industry before maintaining that we need to discover a new one. He suggests that this should be the frontier of "Cooperative Control" and contends that FDR's New Deal is a manifestation of this (Elliott 1936: 192). Elliott once

again invokes the Turner thesis in a 1939 publication where he states that “The economic development of the United States has been characterized by a series of frontiers” (Elliott 1939: 293). He concludes–again consistent with the thesis–that “they created a philosophy which sufficiently permeated society to characterize an era” (Elliott 1939: 293).

The third Wisconsin-school characteristic mentioned above was the Progressive philosophy that the government should be actively engaged in attacking social problems. This was a major theme in Elliott’s life. Not only did he join New-Deal efforts to end the suffering associated with the Depression, but all four of his publications not related to his dissertation are organized around this theme. The piece in which he best lays out his personal philosophy is the first of these: “Some Aspects of Economic Chaos–And Suggested Remedies” (Elliott 1936). Mentioned above, this article contends that the US has benefitted from the existence of various frontiers, but that these have vanished. Where shall we turn in order to address the economic disaster of the 1930s? His response:

> I do not agree with the Liberty Leaguers that these frontiers enabled us to overcome depressions solely by "natural forces" and by a laissez-faire policy on the part of the government. The facts are quite to the contrary. The government protected, by the establishment of forts, the westward advance of the first pioneers; it later offered homesteads to their successors. It subsidized the railroads with gigantic grants of land. It subsidized with mail contracts the steam shipping industry. It protected inventors with patent rights. It protected manufacturers with tariff walls. And in almost every depression it sought to raise prices by measures of inflation (Elliott 1936: 191).

The government played a central role in the economic and social successes of the past and, he goes on to argue, it must continue to do so in the future.[8] His 1938, 1939, and 1948 publications are all aimed at explaining and defending the National Labor Relations board and associated legislation and are based on the implied premise that labor, alone, is too weak to force management to give serious consideration to their concerns. Theforefore:

> That these and other interferences with human rights might be stopped, that labor might be guaranteed the right to self-organization, that it might bargain on a basis of equality with its employer, and that industrial peace might be safeguarded, the Congress of the United States enacted, in July, 1935, the National Labor Relations Act, and created a National Labor Relations Board of three members to administer the Act (Elliott 1939: 295-6).

Government, he believed, could act poorly (Elliott 1938: 318)–but it had to act if we were to move forward. Therefore:

> UNLESS IN THE MEANWHILE WE HAVE DEFINITE AND RAPID ECONOMIC REFORMS ON A VAST SCALE, LEADING TO A MORE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME AND ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR THE MASSES, AN ECONOMIC DEPRESSION, DEEPER AND MORE TRAGIC IN ITS CONSEQUENCES THAN THE LAST, WILL BEFALL THE UNITED STATES (caps in the original; Elliott 1936: 194).

It is the public, not private, sector that spearheads this reform.

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[8]Notwithstanding the cost paid by indigenous Americans.

The last of the four characteristics of the Wisconsin school was that “intellectuals should devote themselves to affairs of importance to people outside of the academy, serving in government offices when necessary” (Kirkendall 1963: 207). The biographical section above shows clearly that Elliott followed this dictum to the extreme. He first left TCU for Washington at the end of fall 1933 “to serve for three or four months as assistant deputy administrator of retail and wholesale codes in the fourth division of the National Recovery Administration” (TCU Daily Skiff Dec 8, 1933: 1). Such was his standing at the university that both a dinner and a chapel program were held in his honor. It was expected at the time that “He will return in time to complete the latter half of the spring semester’s work” (TCU Daily Skiff Dec 8, 1933: 1). It was not to be.

Elliott clearly believed in his mission. In a letter to TCU History Professor W.J. Hammond, he wrote:

> The threat against the N. R. A. [National Recovery Administration] comes from the groups and the minds that made the depression inevitable. But the intrigue of this group cannot overwhelm American thinking groups nor its youthful groups as they join hands with the president in taking the first step in the direction of building an America of security, plenty and spiritual realization (TCU Daily Skiff Jan 12, 1934: 1).

And in his retirement speech he made it clear that he regretted none of it:

> In concluding 27 years in an agency with which you were a pioneer, certainly there is nostalgia, there is also pride and most of all I am grateful for each day with this agency; – with all the experiences, that which was pleasant, and that which was not, pressures and actions which you felt unwarranted; and

> even those situations which at times called for lonely decisions, difficult of making; all these I am certain I am better for having had and made (Elliott 1961: 4).

One might argue that, given his desire to earn a divinity degree, his willingness to interrupt his undergraduate education to serve in WWI (and the manner in which he won his medal), and the many activities he pursued at TCU as both a student and a faculty member, Edwin Elliott was already predisposed to public service well before he met his Wisconsin-educated dissertation supervisor (who was also, incidentally, a WWI veteran). Quite right, but this does not diminish the fact that we find strong evidence of the belief that academics should serve the public in Elliott's biography and writing and hence consistency with the Wisconsin roots of Wiley.

These four characteristics of the Wisconsin school were not the only Institutionalist signposts in Elliott's work. A particularly strong theme was the ceremonial-instrumental dichotomy, especially as applied to the inconsistency between our social institutions and the machine technology available:

> In the United States we have developed a great machine economy but have not prepared ourselves for its consequences. We have developed a scientifically efficient and effective technique of production. In our technique of distribution, however, there is a tremendous and tragic lag, and as a result we have on the one hand plenty and on the other want (Elliott 1938: 317-8).

He continues on this theme in a follow-up piece the next year, where he argues that the frontier culture of the US had the unfortunate side effect of creating "a philosophy which led men to play for *big prizes* rather than for security" (Elliott 1939: 293). The result was an

anti-union atmosphere that created "insecurity for millions of our people" (Elliott 1939: 293). He expressed the real fear in this article that if we did not take actions to remedy this, our own people would turn to fascism just as in Germany where, "It is true that unemployment has been abolished, but labor is working under conscription" (Elliott 1939: 293). It was his belief that the National Labor Relations Act would create conditions under which "the worker will not easily fall the victim of the Fascist demagogue" (Elliott 1939: 298). And when it comes to reform, he again takes an Institutionalist line: "No institution or system is sacred unless it contributes to the good life and the good life for all" (Elliott 1936: 195).

Two last areas of Elliott's focus are worth noting in establishing his bona fides in Institutionalist thought: monopoly and maldistribution of income. Here, at least with respect to the former, we may see more of the influence of one of his other committee members, Robert Montgomery.[9] Although his publications in the area come after Elliott had completed his PhD, it seems reasonable to believe that Montgomery's interest in this area may have affected him. And it should be noted that Wiley's thesis supervisor, Richard Ely, also focused on the issue and taught a class on monopolies and trusts (Vaughn 1996: 113). However, while Montgomery's view of monopoly was nuanced (he did not always view it as a negative; Kling 1996: 57-61), this was not the case with Elliott. He mentions it, for example, as a contributing factor to our economic woes in Elliott 1936:

> In the present system, we have exploitation in unbridled competition on the one hand and exploitation by monopoly on the other. We find monopolies such as utilities making profits ranging to more than 3000% (Elliott 1936:

[9]Wiley and Montgomery were, incidentally, close friends (Vaughn 1996: 132-4).

193).

Of course, as implied here, his real concern was the impact on the distribution of income. This has been and continues to be a popular topic in Institutional economics.[10] In addition, it has sometimes been linked to economic secular and cyclical downturns, as in this passage from Clarence Ayres: “All this means that the institutionally determined income pattern of our society is the basic cause of economic instability” (Ayres 1952:161). Elliott clearly agreed:

> The maldistribution of the resources of the world among the nations will bring war. The maldistribution of income and wealth among the people of a nation bring depressions and present threats to existing institutions (Elliott 1936: 196).
>
> These economic shocks of depression can only be allayed by a saner balance between production on the one hand and distribution on the other. In a market economy a balance can only be had where there is a substantial and consistent purchasing power in the hands of the masses of the people (Elliott 1938: 318).

And in his piece arguing that a well-paid, well-organized working class was the best defense against fascism:

> Maldistribution may be observed along the panorama of any modern highway. Here are the Lincoln, the "T" Model, and some of the hundreds of thousands who tread with weary feet, seeking men's primary right and

[10]An EconLit search for “income distribution” in the Journal of Economic Issues for 1968 through 2024 yields 463 hits. Just over 400 of those are in the 2000s.

heritage - the right to work - without finding it (Elliott 1939: 294).

Simply put, “It is an immoral civilization that thwarts its youth and offers it no opportunity for honorable self expression, and offers no guarantee of security” (Elliott 1936: 193).

In conclusion, while some of this may sound more Wisconsin school than Texas, there is no question that Edwin Elliott was an Institutionalist economist in his scholarship, public service, and philosophy of life.

Remembering Edwin Elliott

Despite this remarkable life, he is all-but-forgotten on the very campus where he should be most celebrated. There are a few exceptions. For example, Dr. Kara Vuic, the Lance Corporal Benjamin W. Schmidt Professor of War, Conflict, and Society in 20th-Century America in the History Department at TCU, has made mention of Dr. Elliott in writing of the founding of the Veterans’ Plaza (TCU News 2023). In addition, he was one of the inspirations behind the annual Wassenich Award for Mentoring. Sponsored by Mark and Linda P. Wassenich, it is to honor faculty and staff who are great mentors to students. Mark's father, Paul G. (1911-2005; TCU class of 1934) who taught at TCU from 1957 to 1976 and was also a very popular figure on campus, often cited Dr. Elliott as his mentor:

> I met Dr. Edwin A. Elliott, who had recently received his doctorate from the University of California (sic), at a Hi-Y Officers Retreat at a camp near Glen Rose. From then on, he was my favorite professor. Though I tried psychology and sociology as majors, I finally majored in economics because of my fondness for Dr. Elliott. He stimulated me to read authors like Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, Sinclair Lewis’s *Arrowsmith*, and others in addition to

> studying economics texts and the lecture notes. He was a wonderful lecturer (Wassenich 2022: 24).

When the award is announced every year, mention is made of Dr. Elliott as having been an important influence on Paul Wassenich's life.

In fact, this is how I first became aware of Dr. Elliott's existence: by chance, I was sitting behind Linda and Mark Wassenich during the award ceremony in fall 2021. Elliott's name was mentioned and I took the opportunity to learn more. *I had at that point been in the Economics Department for thirty-four years and had never heard his name, nor had any of my colleagues.* He had not been mentioned in the TCU Daily Skiff since March 9, 1976 (in reference to the now-defunct Edwin Elliott Lecture, the last of which appears to have occurred in 1979; Fort Worth Star-Telegram Feb 23, 1979: 33) and his death was not covered by our school paper.[11]

How can a person who accomplished so much and inspired so many disappear from our radar? Jeff Biddle suggests that the tendency of Institutionalists to enter public service in greater numbers than their mainstream counterparts may have played a role in the school of thought's. He bases this on the premise that:

> for a school of economic thought to survive, each generation of adherents must, through some means of persuasion, convince bright and able members of the next generation to identify with and advance the ideas and

[11]In fairness, his death (August 5, 1986) occurred during summer break. On the other hand, the first issue of the new school year was August 28, just over three weeks later. Someone so important to TCU's history surely deserved a paragraph or two (instead, much of the issue was dedicated to the impact of the increase in the state drinking age).

the research program of the school (Biddle 1998: 109).

If Institutionalists are serving in the government and not standing in front of a classroom or directing dissertations, fewer new Institutionalists are created. Or, as Biddle summarizes, "in order to survive, a school of economics must successfully reproduce" (Biddle 109).

Biddle found mixed support for his hypothesis (yes, more Institutionalists entered government, but the difference in PhD generation–while clearly a factor–was not highly significant), but it tells a compelling story.[12] Edwin Elliott's career in academia was very short. He was at TCU from 1926 through 1933, with a leave of absence from 1929 to 1930. Depending on the semesters he came and went, that means that he was an active faculty member for somewhere around five years. These were clearly very memorable years, so much so that the 1929 yearbook was dedicated to him. But, his time to make his mark as a scholar and therefore be remembered in the discipline was very limited. The only pieces he published while a college professor were two derived from his dissertation. He published four more articles after that, three specifically about his job at the National Labor Relations Board (Elliott 1938, 1939, and 1948) and one broader piece on how policy should be designed if the country were to escape from the slump of the 1930s (Elliott 1936). I think it was his most important and the one that could have been a springboard for additional significant publications. There, he wrote:

> The road to progress and plenty lies in the acceptance of co-operative control in economic endeavor and in the exercise of goodwill in personal relationships. Economic progress without poverty is our goal. It means food,

[12]His research focused specifically on the Wisconsin program. "Significant" here refers to statistical significance as Biddle's study was an empirical one.

clothing, shelter, and a rising standard of living for all of our people. There are no golden and sure roads to this end, but it may be reached in part by:

1. Careful study of our resources and potential productive power. By wise administration we can produce $135,000,000,000 in goods rather than $49,000,000,000 produced for the year 1935.

2. Agricultural reform, which will lead us to low tariffs, conservation of the soil, reforestation of marginal land, and allocation of production based upon careful soil analysis, and the establishment of cooperative farms in great numbers.

3. State labor laws comparable to the present National Labor Relations Act, guaranteeing to labor the right to bargain collectively.

4. The public ownership of public utilities.

5. The establishment of producer cooperatives on one hand and consumer cooperatives on the other; and credit cooperatives for both groups.

6. A tax on labor saving devices proportional to the number of men displaced, and the establishment of the thirty hour work week.

7. A $15,000,000,000 program of public works and family housing, financed by steeply graduated income, inheritance, and gift taxes.

8. A constitutional amendment which shall permit Congress to legislate for human welfare and a more adequate program of social security.

9. A referendum to the people before Congress may declare war, and legislation taking the profit out of war for every- body.

10. Developing in our people, through our churches and schools, a social

> mind, a social motive, and a social philosophy, which shall lead us to act less and less in self interest and more and more in interest of the common good (Elliott 1936: 195-6).

Despite the quality of the article, so far as can be determined by modern metrics it has only been cited once (by Rosenof 1987). The bottom line is that Elliott–like many of his Institutionalist contemporaries–did not leave behind a body of work for other scholars to sift through in succeeding generations. He was too busy trying to save the country from economic depression and political extremism.

While this might suggest why he is unknown within the discipline, even to economists at his alma mater and former employer, it does not explain his status at TCU. But maybe that is not fair. How long do we expect figures–even inspirational ones like Elliott–to be actively recalled? Elliott left TCU permanently (though he did not know it at the time) in 1933. He retired from public service in 1961 and passed away in 1986. At the time of this writing (2024), this means that he departed TCU nearly a century ago, last worked at the National Labor Relations Board 63 years ago, and died almost four decades ago. And, as suggested in the introduction to this section, his legacy *does* live on through the TCU Veterans' Plaza and the Wassenich Award. I suspect that this is far more than he ever expected–though I do hope that we can increase his name recognition on the campus. He is a wonderful example to both faculty and students.

Conclusions

Institutionalism's history is a rich one. It is also a sad one, with the decline of our school of thought's influence in the interwar and especially postwar period. Stories like Elliott's highlight, however, that this was not a function of any internal lack of effort or talent. Rather (and somewhat ironically), institutional forces were to blame. What else should economists have been doing in the midst of a global disaster that created such fertile ground for totalitarian regimes other than designing and administering policy to save our nation from such a fate?

Figure 2: Edwin A. Elliott, TCU Digital Repository.

Would the world have been better served had Elliott's talents been oriented toward writing and publishing? These are impossible questions to answer objectively, but surely the 1930s needed economists like Elliott to be dedicated public servants. He deserves to be remembered.

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