
Bookshelf

The Scottish Abstract of Statistics 1983

by Jim Walker

In reviewing a newly published book or journal the reviewer can comment on various aspects of the work, for example the author's background and ideological leaning, the style of writing, the clarity of the prose and the contribution or impact the publication is liable to make to the existing body of literature; all these as well as commenting on the actual content of the work. When faced with the task of reviewing the most recent volume of an established data source such as the **Scottish Abstract of Statistics** (Volume 12/1983, **The Scottish Office**, £22.00), the treatment must be somewhat less elaborate and, consequently, less eloquent. The major problem faced by the reviewer is how to set about extracting the relevant and interesting information from what is, in effect, an exercise in adding one (or at most two depending on the reliability and efficiency of the data collecting agency) more increment to an existing series of statistics. One might go on at length about the various trends which are continued or reversed by the addition of the most recent observation but that is dangerous without the benefit of further knowledge of circumstances and chance events. Or one might pick out a number of new figures which, on the face of it, might appear surprising or interesting to the public at large but are actually random choices by a desperate reviewer anxious for something to say. Or one might comment on the deletions and additions of numerous tables. But since abstract in this sense means summary it is at the discretion of the compilers anyway which statistics we are fed. The troublesomeness of reviewing the content of a data source might be avoided, however, by pondering some less obvious features of this publication.

One notable side effect of the acquisition of the most recent **Scottish Abstract** is the pronounced dent in one's bank balance caused by its purchase. For a publication which, at first glance, is an attempt to impart knowledge about various aspects of Scottish life to an expectant public it makes a fair attempt to price itself out of the market. In 1980, at least in comparison with the current volume, it was reasonably priced at £8.50. The 1983 publication will set the purchaser back an incredible £22 - a 259% increase over the period, somewhat above the relevant rate of price inflation in the UK. But if this price increase is not strictly in line with the rate of inflation perhaps the "residual" increase can be credited to government policy. The government's free market economics come quite expensive to the seeker of knowledge who relies on official sources. The information gathering and reporting centres have been directed to charge "economic" prices for the data they collect even to the extent, it would appear, of their being in possession of the statistics but practically no-one else being able to afford them. Perfect knowledge and the free flow of information are fundamental to the theoretical micro-foundations of neo-classical economics - the economics which form the very basis of the present government's avowed economic strategy of monetarism. Unfortunately this finer point of ideology, like so many others, seems to have escaped the government.

But isn't this criticism of the **Abstract** rather trivial and irrelevant? Aren't there more important, more tangible features of the publication which might be reported? Two further features of the content of the **Scottish Abstract of Statistics** can quickly be noted. Firstly, the official absurdity of the Continental Shelf region still remains. This administrative anomaly excludes that region's company profits and stock appreciation from the figures for Scottish GDP, yet includes the income of those employed in the region who are resident in Scotland (the vast majority). Thus the Scottish GDP figure remains, as it were, in limbo, neither fully reflecting Scotland including the Continental Shelf nor Scotland the recognised administrative planning region. Secondly, the commentary supplied by the Scottish Office statisticians in the introduction to the various sections is almost exclusively limited to mere reporting of the sources and methods used to arrive at the figures. Interpretation and analysis of the data is left entirely to the data "consumer". In some respects this might truly be regarded as being in the interests of 'objectivity', whereas in others it may be one way of avoiding embarrassing comment on the adverse effects of their employers' (ie the governments') policies.

The **Scottish Abstract of Statistics** is not widely reviewed in the Scottish press when it appears each year. This is not surprising - it is not news. It is, effectively, a compilation of recent but not "new" data. Its presentation and content is neither exciting nor, indeed, particularly interesting to the majority of the population. It does, however, serve a purpose and an important one at that. It gathers together information on Scotland in a uniform way readily usable by economic and social researchers for forecasting and analytical purposes. That is why the foregoing discussion of the increase in price is not trivial or irrelevant. It is an obstacle to much useful, investigative research. This may be a consequence of an over-zealous attempt by the government to make its various departments cost-effective. It is no more defensible for that. What is more worrying is that it is a back-hand way of discouraging fruitful analysis of the consequences of government policy. It functions in the same way that the creation of the Continental Shelf region, a previous government's attempt to belie the effects of North Sea oil on the Scottish economy, has made interpretation of the Scottish GDP indicator difficult and unclear. The **Scottish Abstract** would, I am sure, be more appreciated if it were accompanied by, for instance, a unified Scottish Social Progress Supplement. This would allow the Scottish Office to comment on interesting features of the new figures, to draw explicit attention to the difficulties involved in compiling the data for a region not a nation and provide it with a vehicle with which to explain the effects of government policies on Scotland. No doubt more stimulating and provocative discussion would ensue and the economies of large scale production of the **Abstract** which might result in order to fulfil increased demand might in turn lead to a reduction in the present prohibitive price.