UNIVERSITY OF LONDON FOUNDATION DAY 2009

Chancellor, in accordance with the Charter, Statutes and Ordinances of the University, I present to you this person on whom we wish you to confer the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science (Economics)

Professor Robert William Fogel

It is the mark of greatest esteem amongst scientists to be a recipient of a Nobel Prize, an honour that Robert Fogel gained in 1993 (jointly with Douglass North). Their prize was awarded for "having renewed research in economic history by applying economic theory and quantitative methods in order to explain economic and institutional change". Nobel Prizes in Economics are usually given many years after the work to which they refer - for that work must both change the field and stand the test of changing times to gain recognition. So it was with Robert Fogel. But this was not just a normal time delay, for it also marked the move from academic revolutionary to establishment figure.

Robert Fogel grew up in the Great Depression era in America, the child of migrants recently arrived from Odessa in Russia. During his first degree studies at Cornell, he switched from natural sciences to economics and history, aware of contemporary worries that the US economy of the 1940s would slip back into its 1930s' slump. He completed his BA in 1948 and his MA at Columbia in 1960. He went on to study for a PhD at Johns Hopkins and followed a career that took him from there to Rochester, to Chicago, to Harvard and back to Chicago. He had the great good fortune to be supervised in his graduate work by Simon Kuznets, the most eminent American economic historian of the mid-twentieth century. While his prior training at Columbia had given Professor Fogel the tools and interests for economic history research, it was Kuznets whose expansive knowledge offered the broad scope of questions about modern economic growth which both informed and stimulated so much economic historical work of the latter twentieth century.

It would be a mistake to label Professor Fogel as belonging to someone else's school, for he is known as one of a small set of activists who created 'cliometrics' in the 1960s. These young scholars created a revolution. They sought to overturn conventional answers, establish answers to unthought of questions, and establish new agendas for research by following *Clio*, the muse of history, in a new way with technical economics: mathematics, statistics and modelling. Three seminal theses stand out in Professor Fogel's research career.

When Professor Fogel began his graduate work, it was conventional to afford railways the status of having been indispensable in opening up the American west and thus to the growth of the US in the nineteenth century. But young Fogel felt that the underlying question and assumptions were woolly, and set out to specify the problem more carefully in his *Railroads and American Economic Growth* (1964). With immense care, he constructed a whole counterfactual American economy working without railroads. This included a new map of the United States in which he showed where water transport (improved waterways and canals, complete with cross sectional maps of the gradients and falls) could have made settlement and agriculture viable. Students today are as amazed at this evidence of his serious application of the principles of counterfactual analysis, as Fogel's contemporaries were by his insistence that the social savings due to the railroads were actually only a few percentage points of the national output of the day, or a couple of years of growth. His work created a research paradigm and spawned a whole genre of railway and social savings calculations. But

the ensuing debate raged not just over the validity of his carefully calculated figures, but over the professional line that some thought Fogel had just crossed. This was the line marking out the difference between historical data *found* in archives (or, at a push, supplemented by interpolation), and data which could not under any circumstances have been observed but which had been *constructed* through the manipulation of economic models. But this was what the cliometric revolution was about: it was not just serious attention to measurement, but the analysis required to sustain it, that marked out the so-called 'new economic history' of the 1960s and 70s.

Professor Fogel's work on slavery with Stanley Engerman in *Time on the Cross* (1974), and later in *Without Consent or Contract* (1989), proved even more highly provocative. Historians had already begun to question an older belief that the institution of slavery was bound for collapse before the American Civil War. But it was Fogel and his collaborators' detailed historical scholarship and critical economic measurement which established that American slavery was, in its context, a rationally efficient economic institution, and so would not have collapsed on its own. Such conclusions were inherently political and so created waves not just in academic life (where it divided the cliometrics community), but in the wider public sphere given the on-going civil rights problems in America at that time. Those waves continued to reverberate. I remember vividly squashing into a small room at the University of Chicago to attend the press conference on the day his Nobel Prize was announced in 1993, where journalist after journalist asked incredulously, "How could it be that a system as morally reprehensible as slavery could be economically rational?". Professor Fogel patiently explained not just once, but several times, that such a juxtaposition was not only possible, but had happened; meanwhile his African-American wife and occasional research partner, Enid Cassandra Morgan, sat calmly by. These works quickly became landmarks around which 'the slavery debates' revolved. Their chains of evidence and argument were so carefully and so strongly constructed that despite the many attacks at the time and since, many of his main claims still stand.

As if this was not enough for any self respecting scholar, Professor Fogel has, for several decades been working on an even larger question implicit in his book title *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700-2100* (2004). Sorting out the long-run relationships between longevity, morbidity, heights and nutrition is a wonderfully difficult problem. There is a vicious cycle of poverty, poor nutrition, shortness and early death compared to a virtuous cycle of comparative richness, good nutrition, tallness and longevity. How did the populations of some countries in the world break out of the vicious into the virtuous cycle? Professor Fogel and his team have assembled the records of a very large number of individuals, past and present, in another classic social science history project to answer this question. And the answers that were relevant for the past are equally relevant for the hungry and poor of today. Professor Fogel has been awarded many grants, prizes and honours, but perhaps it is indicative of his commitment and pride in this project that his *curriculum vitae* lists, as his most recent grant, one that stretches forward to 2014, at which point Professor Fogel will reach the grand age of 88.

Chancellor, it is with great pleasure that I ask you to confer the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science (Economics) *honoris causa* on Professor Robert William Fogel.

Delivered by Professor Mary Morgan, Professor of the History of Economics, The London School of Economics and Political Science