Book Review – *Peter Warburton*

The Serviceberry:
An Economy of Gifts and Abundance

By Robin Wall Kimmerer

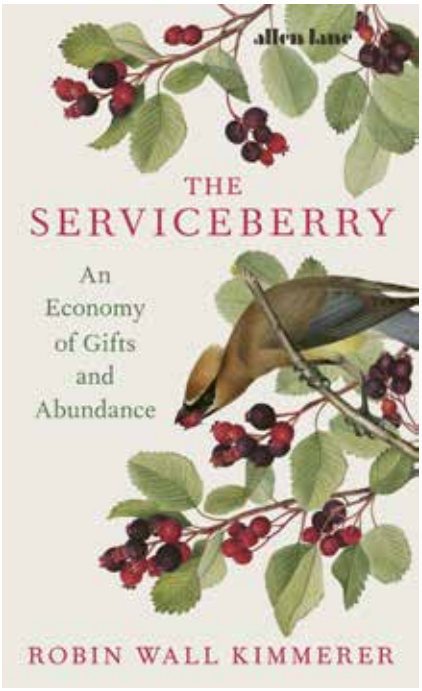
Allen Lane, London, 2024, Hardback,110pp, £14.99 (Amazon £12.19) ISBN 978-0-241-72130-8.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is an indigenous scientist and professor of environmental biology at the State University of New York. This slim volume, easily read inside a couple of hours, is bursting with ideas and observations. Its central thesis is that we live in a world of abundance, rather than scarcity, as asserted in mainstream economics. Accepting that there are times of genuine scarcity, Robin asserts that "it is manufactured scarcity that I cannot accept. In order for capitalistic market economics to function, there must be scarcity where it does not actually exist" (p79).

Using the parable of the serviceberry tree, she explores the concept of the gift economy, based on reciprocity, interconnectedness and gratitude. How, she asks, can we learn from indigenous wisdom and the plant world to reimagine what we value most? She laments that in an economy rooted in scarcity, competition and the hoarding of resources, we have surrendered our values to a system that actively harms what we love.

The serviceberry, which also goes by many other names, is a fruit that tastes like a "blueberry crossed with the satisfying heft of an apple, a touch of rosewater and a miniscule crunch of almond-flavoured seeds" (p6). Robin lists the gift exchanges that precipitate the arrival of the fruits: the maples that gave their leaves to the soil, the countless invertebrates and microbes which exchanged nutrients and energy to build the humus in which a serviceberry seed could take root, the cedar waxwing that dropped the seed, the sun, the rain, the early spring flies that pollinated the flowers, the farmer who wielded the shovel to settle the seedlings …

Apart from some occasional lapses into a theistic paradigm, the author



is clearly much more comfortable with the idea of Mother Earth as the rightful recipient of our gratitude. For Anglicans, the liturgical refrain, "all things come from you and of your own do we give you", springs more readily to mind. This book imagines a global economy very different from the one we observe. Her vision contains elements of the Garden of Eden before the Fall and the life of the early apostles described in Acts 2 and 4, where they "held all things in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" and "there were no needy persons among them."

Robin takes aim at many targets, rather too many for such a short book. She contests the premise that humankind's selfishness will always destroy the Commons – she sees the latter as the shared resource, freely provided to all, and over which no-one has priority. She appeals to the wisdom of the ages and examples of reciprocity and cooperation in the natural world in order to argue that the gift economy offers a viable conceptual alternative to the mixed (private market and public provision) economy model which pervades the western world.

She rails against the greed and waste that denies an equitable distribution of food, safe drinking water and shelter to the earth's eight billion inhabitants. According to various estimates, between 25 and 40 per cent of all food is wasted, while approximately 700 million people live in abject poverty and 200 million in near-starvation. For someone who describes her understanding of economics as rudimentary, Robin makes cavalier leaps to conclude that this is all the fault of market economics. She fails to mention the critical roles of war, politics, corruption and unregulated private monopolies in this human tragedy.

Robin climbs aboard a popular bandwagon in her repudiation of economic growth as a defensible objective. She conjures up the mental picture of a juggernaut whose progress is fed by the looting of the earth's resources, and which throws up a pall of black smoke which despoils the air and heats up the climate. Yet most

Madeira
Photo: onthebeach.co.uk

of the recent growth in the world economy today represents the human flourishing of hundreds of millions of (mainly) Asian people, with relatively small carbon footprints, who have been lifted out of varying degrees of poverty. Surely this is to be celebrated?

And Robin alludes (p14) to the capacity of the gift economy to multiply through reciprocity: "gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of the gift economy, and they have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange, their energy concentrating as they pass from hand to hand, a truly renewable resource." Would not the gift economy also display growth in its natural state?

The author is attracted to the notion of storing wealth "in the bellies of our neighbours" (p32), rather than hoarding it for our own future use. Conceptually, she says, the abundance of the earth will always manifest somewhere, and it is the bounden duty of whoever enjoys a harvest to share it liberally. I would suggest that, taking this to its logical conclusion, investment occurs only as an imputed obligation of our neighbours to share their future surplus. Collectively, everything is always consumed. If humankind had adopted this model, we would scarcely have survived a run of poor harvests and there would have been no technological revolutions, let alone the mind-blowing innovations currently underway.

The logic of the serviceberry economic system is to accept the constraints of the natural environment, to live only where the gifts are available, and to accept their seasonality. Yet, the human disposition is to view these constraints as challenges to be overcome. According to a study by Nature Communication, approximately 23% of the global population (1.8 billion people) lives in areas directly exposed to flood risk. The UN World Water Development Report 2023 estimates that 26% of the world's population lacks access to safe drinking water. About 72% of the world's population lives in countries facing precarious situations, according to the Global Footprint Network. This includes factors like poverty, vulnerability to climate change and inadequate access to resources. Global trading activity has facilitated human flourishing – and vulnerability – in places where natural 'gifts' are in short supply.

Recently returned from a holiday in Madeira, a large rock in the North Atlantic, I am struck by the extent to which human ingenuity has turned this inhospitable island into a thriving tourist destination with excellent motorways. Madeira's ecology bears gifts – sugar cane, bananas and grapes – but these would not support the current human population of 270,000, in addition to the 60,000 land tourists and 30,000 on cruise ships arriving each New Year for the celebrations. Not much hope for the gift economy there.

Nevertheless, there is something charming and alluring about the heady idealism of this book. The parable of the serviceberry "is an antidote to the broken relationships and misguided goals of our times", a reminder that hoarding won't save us (cf Luke 12:18) and that all flourishing is mutual. Ancient human wisdom – as well as scriptural wisdom – is being jettisoned at an astonishing pace in our society, in favour of instantly available (and eminently fallible) digital oracles. Perhaps only after our cleverness has led us down the path to ruin, will we regain respect for the wisdom of the ages, the "ancient paths" of Jeremiah 6:16.

Peter Warburton is director of Economic Perspectives, an international macroeconomics and financial consultancy based in Luton, Bedfordshire. He is also the chair of the FiBQ Steering Group.