Preface

In January 2019, members of Cambridge University’s Department of Politics and International Studies and Faculty of History, and of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, held a gathering of academics to discuss the history of Basic Income. During the day the absence and need of a comprehensive history of Basic Income was noted, and during the dinner at the end of the event a discussion took place as to who was going to write it. A number of scholars who would have been eminently qualified to do so declined the opportunity for various reasons, and I was left as the only one not to have refused the opportunity, even though I was far less qualified for the task than all of the obvious candidates.

Writing a history of such an important and increasingly influential idea has been both daunting and a privilege. The indefinite article in the subtitle is important. Any history of a period, a place, or an idea, is a history, rather than the history. Many different histories could have been written: and the same is true in relation to Basic Income. This is definitely a history of Basic Income, and should not be regarded as in any sense definitive.

The history that I have written is first of all a history of Basic Income—of a regular unconditional income paid without means test or work test—and only of such ‘cousins’ as Negative Income Tax and Minimum Income Guarantee when their histories relate to the history of Basic Income. Similarly, historic and current social security and taxation systems are only mentioned to the extent that they relate directly to the Basic Income debate.

The history is comprehensive in the sense that it is about both the idea of Basic Income and a variety of relevant pilot projects and experiments, and in the sense that it begins at the beginning of the modern debate at the end of the eighteenth century and ends as close as possible to the present day. An additional intention has been to be geographically comprehensive. This has been a more difficult criterion to meet, for two reasons: first of all, I know far more about Basic Income’s history in the UK than anywhere else because I have been intimately involved in that history since 1984; and secondly, and connectedly, because a high proportion of the Basic Income debate before the 1980s occurred in the UK, and a substantial proportion of it since then. Comprehensiveness in relation to events, discussions and publications has been relatively easy to achieve for the earlier part of the debate, but comprehensiveness in relation to more recent debate has been quite impossible to
achieve simply because there has been so much of it. About fifteen years ago there was a significant step change in the character of the debate. Pilot projects took place, the debate became worldwide (in the sense of widespread around the planet) and then global (in the sense that a single debate was happening globally), and the number of publications about Basic Income exploded. Until about fifteen years ago I could honestly claim to have read most of what was published in English on Basic Income, and occasional literature in other languages, as could a number of other people involved in the debate. Now nobody could claim that. It is generally true of any history-writing that a different author would have chosen different material to include and would have ordered it differently. That would certainly be true of this history, and particularly in relation to the more recent period.