BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS


Michael Hunter


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LISA JARDINE CBE
12 April 1944 — 25 October 2015
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After completing a PhD on Francis Bacon, which was published as a book in 1974, Lisa Jardine became a leading expert on Renaissance humanism and particularly on Desiderius Erasmus, her monograph on whom was published in 1993. Meanwhile, she had become the first woman Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, later holding chairs at Queen Mary and at University College London. In the early 1990s she became a notable broadcaster and public intellectual, while her Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance (1996) made her a best-selling author. In the following decade, she published various significant books, including biographies of Francis Bacon, Sir Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke, and Going Dutch, a perceptive study of Anglo-Dutch relations in the seventeenth century. She was also instrumental in founding the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters in 2002, while associated initiatives included the publication of the ‘Hooke Folio’ after its return to the Royal Society in 2006. In her later years, she took on a number of important public responsibilities, perhaps most notably her chairmanship of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority from 2008 to 2014. Lisa Jardine will be remembered as a lively and charismatic figure, who championed the causes that she adopted with vigour and who brought enthusiasm and panache to all the activities in which she engaged.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

Lisa Jardine was born on 12 April 1944, daughter of the mathematician and intellectual, Jacob Bronowski (1908–1974), who had emigrated to England as a boy, and his wife, the

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sculptress, Rita Coblentz (1917–2010). It was a highly intellectual family as well as a Jewish one, and Lisa later recalled how both these factors affected her: her Jewish background placed her beyond the English class system and made her something of an outsider, thus giving her an empathy for others of comparable status, while her father’s intellectual ambitions for her (almost as a surrogate for the son he would have liked to have had but never did) ensured that she was destined for an academic career. Later, she, like many others, was impressed by Bronowski’s epic TV series, *The Ascent of Man* (1973), and she herself made a study of her father’s career in her final years.

Lisa was educated at Cheltenham Ladies College, from where she won a place at Newnham College, Cambridge, to read mathematics. However, her mathematical studies did not go well, and, after completing Part I in that subject, for Part II she transferred to English. During her undergraduate years, she also became involved in politics, influenced particularly by the legendary left-wing intellectual, Raymond Williams, to whom one of her books was effectively a posthumous tribute (*7)* and to whose legacy she returned in the Tanner lectures that she delivered in Cambridge in 2008 (23).

On graduation, Lisa transferred to the University of Essex, where she took a Master’s degree in literary translation with Donald Davie. She then returned to Cambridge, initially starting work on a PhD on translations of the Bible under the supervision of Derek Brewer. However, she transferred to Robert Bolgar, author of *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries* (1954), who became her mentor: it was he who suggested Francis Bacon as an appropriately major figure for her to study, also introducing her to Desiderius Erasmus and the humanist traditions that he exemplified. Her PhD concerned the role of dialectic in Bacon’s thought, using great learning to place him in the context of sixteenth-century humanist ideas, and arguing that these were formative of the methodological approach that Bacon championed. A revised version of the thesis appeared as her first book in 1974 (1), and she followed it up with various scholarly articles on the Cambridge curriculum in the sixteenth century, developing the argument that the training that students received was more suited to contemporary needs than had formerly been recognized (2–4). These studies were pursued at the Warburg Institute, where Lisa held a post-doctoral research fellowship from 1971 to 1974, and where she came under the influence of such intellectual giants as Frances Yates and D. P. Walker.

### The Cambridge years

In the mid 1970s Lisa returned to Cambridge, first to a research fellowship at Girton, then a college assistant lectureship at King’s. In 1976 she was appointed a Fellow of Jesus, the first woman Fellow of that college and one of the first at a formerly all-male college in Cambridge as a whole. By this time, she had married the scientist and future historian of science, Nick Jardine, and she gave birth to their second child just three days after her appointment to the college. Nick read her first lecture in her place, remarking at the start: ‘I am Dr Jardine. Not, of course, the real Dr Jardine.’

At Jesus, there were high expectations that she would give moral support to the first generation of female students who came into the college at that point, not just in English (the subject she had been appointed to teach) but more generally, and for some years she devoted

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* Numbers in this form refer to the bibliography at the end of the text.
Lisa Jardine

much time and effort to the affairs of the college—though tensions arose in the early 1980s
over the so-called ‘Kite’ redevelopment in which the college was involved (named after the
shape of the piece of land in central Cambridge that it affected), which she and other activists
strenuously opposed. It was also at this time that she first displayed the intense dedication to
teaching and to the support and encouragement of students, whether male or female, that was
to characterize her right up to her death.

In retrospect, these might be seen as the years when Lisa was most fully committed to
English Literature as a discipline, though she continued to teach the subject for the rest
of her career. She was actively involved in the intense debates in the English faculty over
the curriculum, arguing strongly for greater attention to gender issues and supporting new
developments such as a paper on The Literary Representation of Women. Although her college
and faculty commitments meant that for nearly a decade she published only articles, 1983 saw
the appearance of Still Harping on Daughters, in which she took issue with the preoccupations
of many feminist critics who (in her view) took an over-sanguine view of the changing status
of women in the early modern period (5). The book was reissued in 1989 with a new preface
which clarified her stance, and this was further illustrated by a series of studies which she
had already begun to produce, to be collected as Reading Shakespeare Historically (10).
This encapsulated her view that fuller understanding of the dramatic and other literature of
Shakespeare’s period was best achieved by placing it in its proper historical context rather
than by pursuing the presentist preoccupations which she felt that literary critical approaches
often exemplified.

Refiguring the Renaissance

Meanwhile, Lisa was developing the studies of sixteenth-century humanism that she had
begun when studying the background to Bacon for her PhD. In this, she benefited greatly from
the time that she spent as a visiting scholar in the United States, first at Cornell in 1974–75
and then at Princeton in 1987–88 and 1990–91, where she was based in the faculty of History
rather than of English. Indeed, she often reflected on her disciplinary ambidextrousness on
either side of the Atlantic, increasingly resolving it by describing herself as a Renaissance
scholar. In particular, she developed a highly effective partnership with the historian, Anthony
Grafton, which led to the publication of an innovative and influential article on the history
of reading, focused on the Elizabethan intellectual Gabriel Harvey (8), and a collaborative
book, From Humanism to the Humanities (6). This used detailed case studies to reconsider
the function of education in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, seeing it as primarily
intended to produce docile servants of the Renaissance state, in contrast to the mystification
of the arts curriculum at the hands of its protagonists both then and since—and here there were
various barbed comments about the influence of F. R. Leavis and others, for which Lisa was
predominantly responsible.

In a sense, the chapters in that book on humanism in northern Europe provided the germ
for Lisa’s perhaps most important monograph, Erasmus, Man of Letters (9), a dazzling
performance which deployed great erudition (evidenced not least by lengthy Latin quotations
in its endnotes) to offer a new view of one of the major figures of the sixteenth century.
In it, Lisa argued that the image of Erasmus as the archetypal intellectual was essentially
self-constructed: epistolary exchanges between humanist scholars were manufactured and
deployed for public purposes that had been overlooked by previous scholars, who had seen
them as primarily personal documents. A similar approach was adopted towards the artful way in which Erasmus and his colleagues had themselves depicted in paintings and prints: the book is as notable for the effortless way in which it moves between text and image as for its novel use of evidence from the printed page (figure 1). Equally characteristic is its relish in the minutiae of the composition and transmission of texts, the elucidation of which was used to fuel speculation about major issues (such as the making of More’s *Utopia*) in an arresting manner.

**LONDON: THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL**

By the time *Erasmus* was published, Lisa had left Cambridge for London, where she was appointed to a chair at Queen Mary, University of London, in 1989. Her marriage with Nick Jardine had been dissolved some years earlier and in 1982 she had married John Hare. In 1991 they moved into the central London flat where they lived until her death. The early 1990s were
marked by intense activity on Lisa’s part as a journalist and broadcaster, in which she adopted a more public profile than previously. She wrote many articles and reviews for the principal national newspapers and was also a regular contributor to programmes on both television and radio, from 1992 to 1996 acting as presenter of the arts programme, *Night Waves*, on Radio 3. This led to ancillary activities such as becoming judge of the Whitbread Prize for Fiction in 1996 and chair of the judges of the Orange Prize a year later and of the Man Booker Prize in 2002; she was also involved in art exhibitions at the Saatchi Collection and elsewhere. It would be no exaggeration to say that she became one of the best-known intellectuals in the country.

With *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (11), Lisa also became a best-selling author. This book grew out of her writings of the previous decade, showing the same relish for the use of vivid detail for revisionist purposes, but bringing it to a much wider audience. In part, it did so by being more accessible in manner (including a lack of footnotes, something that she later regretted and did not repeat in her later books); but in part, the book achieved its appeal by demystifying the Renaissance through its stress on the role of materiality, market forces and consumerism. Yet intellectualist themes such as the discovery of Greek or the role of printing fitted easily into the overall picture, while the book also had a notable extra-European dimension, which was developed further in a spin-off project, *Global Interests* (14), written in collaboration with Jerry Brotton, a former student who had helped with the research for *Worldly Goods*.

It was the success of *Worldly Goods* which led the publishers, Gollancz, to suggest the subject of Lisa’s next book: this was a meticulously detailed biography of Francis Bacon, the subject of her doctoral research, written in collaboration with Alan Stewart, formerly her research student and by then a lecturer at Birkbeck. *Hostage to Fortune: The Troubled Life of Francis Bacon* (12) gave a blow by blow account of Bacon’s career from cradle to grave based on carefully documented research in archival and other sources, and showed a relish for the minutiae of match-making, diplomacy, finance and, above all, political intrigue by which Bacon’s milieu was dominated. Bacon’s intellectual writings are always present in the background, but in the book they only ever briefly come to the fore. This, however, did nothing to inhibit its enthusiastic reception, and, with Alan Stewart’s help, Lisa seemed truly to have found her vocation as a historical biographer.

**The scientific revolution**

With her next book, Lisa moved in a rather different direction. Until this time, all her writings had been about the Renaissance period, with Bacon as its climax. Now, she moved to the period that he, perhaps more than anyone else, inaugurated—the period of scientific and cultural achievement associated with the foundation of the Royal Society. Lisa was never very explicit about how and why this shift occurred, and it probably had various, interrelated causes. One is to be found in the last chapter of *Hostage to Fortune*, which dealt with Bacon’s intense medical self-experimentation in his later years, a topic that Lisa would later pursue in relation to Robert Hooke. Indeed, her subsequent work might be seen as an exploration of how this inquiring, ‘Baconian’ approach to nature and human endeavour was to be realized in both people’s intellectual aspirations and their lives. More broadly, she had almost certainly learned from the success of her father, Jacob Bronowski, in communicating the history of science to a wide audience in *The Ascent of Man*, while it is hard to avoid the suspicion that a part was
also played by her media activity in the 1990s—that she had come to see that, historically, the public was less interested in the issues raised by Renaissance humanism than in the origins of modernity as represented by the heroic generation that succeeded Bacon’s.

It is thus perhaps unsurprising that *Ingenious Pursuits*, the account of the Scientific Revolution that formed her next book (13), was framed by reflections on the recent controversies over ‘Dolly the sheep’ and the discovery of DNA. In between, the reader was presented with a lively survey of various themes and personalities relating to science in the period of the early Royal Society: the relish for detail formerly devoted to exploring Erasmus’ letters was now applied to blood transfusion and microscopy, to astronomical observation and voyages of discovery and the exotic botanical and medical rarities that these brought home. The whole work represented a bold attempt at synthesis, executed in a lively, if slightly impressionistic, manner; its tone was dominated less by revisionism than by a sense of excitement at the novelty and achievement represented by the generation in which science as we know it was arguably born.

This was followed by another biography, in this case of Sir Christopher Wren (15), which could be seen as bringing together the attention to detail that had characterized the biography of Bacon with the new sense of excitement at the heroic achievements of Wren’s generation. As with *Hostage to Fortune*, *On a Grander Scale* had an arresting story-line—from Wren’s Anglican background, through his brilliant early achievements as a scientist, to the architectural work of his mature years that has made him such a potent symbol in English culture. He was the kind of hero who appealed to Lisa and to the contemporary audience at which her volume was consciously addressed. Moreover, the work was surer in touch than the synthesis that had come out three years previously, anchored in a fuller deployment of source material which was extensively quoted in both the text and the notes (there were also discoveries, including that of the observation chamber in the basement of the Monument, on which Lisa stumbled while researching the book). Above all, there was a grandness of conception about it which helps to explain the widespread acclaim with which it was received.

It was followed a year later by a book-length study of Robert Hooke (16), who had featured extensively in both *Ingenious Pursuits* and *On a Grander Scale*, and who intrigued Lisa in various respects: as a scientific and architectural peer of Wren’s who played a major role in the rebuilding of London after the Fire; as a pioneering microscopist and inventor, whose priority disputes with the Dutch scientist, Christiaan Huygens, and others she documented with relish; and as an obsessive self-medicator, an aspect of him to which she also devoted a separate study (17). Indeed, she played a significant role in the revaluation of Hooke that has been accomplished in the last generation.

**THE CENTRE FOR EDITING LIVES AND LETTERS**

An equally notable development was the inauguration in 2002 of the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters (CELL), one of five research centres funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (from 2005 the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)) selected from nearly 100 applications. CELL was based at Queen Mary, where Lisa was by now well-established (and where her influence had led to a noticeable shift in the gender balance of professorial appointments in related fields). She became director at the outset, the plan being that she and Alan Stewart would alternate in holding the position, though this was precluded.
by his departure from Birkbeck for Columbia in 2004. In its programme, CELL reflected the combined public and academic role that Lisa had by now adopted. It capitalized on the popularity of history, and especially historical biography, through public events such as the annual Harper Collins Lecture, delivered by celebrities like Amanda Foreman and Jenny Uglow. In Lisa’s own words (in an interview reported in The Independent on 28 March 2002), these were used ‘to make traditional archival skills glamorous and sexy’—in other words, to raise the profile of the tasks of editing and presenting historical documents on which such research depended and to which the centre was actually devoted. CELL promoted a number of editorial projects, many of them digital ones which are to be found on the centre’s website, www.livesandletters.ac.uk; it also played a leading role in establishing guidelines and developing methods for the digital presentation of historical materials. From the outset, it had a significant educational role, with a number of PhD students attached to it, while it also offered an MRes that provided an innovative research-based training for budding scholars in the humanities (figure 2).

The combination of the establishment of CELL and the publication of so many major books meant that in the early 2000s Lisa received widespread acclaim. She was given honorary doctorates by Sheffield Hallam University, the University of St Andrews and the Open University; she joined the board of the AHRC; she was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by The Times Educational Supplement and the Medlicott Medal for Service to History by the Historical Association; and in 2005 she was made CBE for services to education. On the
other hand, it was also at this time that she had her first brush with cancer: this was diagnosed in September 2004 and over the next few months Lisa was subjected to a course of therapy which seemed to bring the illness under control, leaving her more implacably determined than ever to achieve as much, in as many fields, as possible.

When CELL came up for renewal as an AHRC research centre in 2006–07, the grant was not continued, much to Lisa’s chagrin. She showed great resourcefulness in finding alternative funding for it; one of these was Queen Mary, the centre’s host institution, but a rather fortuitous concurrence of events meant that one of the most significant outside agencies proved to be the Royal Society. In the early months of 2006 a mysterious manuscript appeared in a London auction room: the so-called ‘Hooke Folio’, a substantial and hitherto-unknown manuscript in the hand of Robert Hooke comprising his notes on the proceedings of the Royal Society, partly his draft minutes for the period when he became secretary of the Society after the death of Henry Oldenburg in 1677, and partly his transcript of the minutes made by his predecessor, interspersed by material otherwise lost and by explosive comments on Hooke’s part. In a cliff-edge scenario, the Royal Society managed to acquire the manuscript, helped by financial contributions from many individuals and institutions, but above all from the Wellcome Trust. In order to have the document digitized and transcribed, it seemed only natural for the Society to turn to CELL—already involved in a project concerned with the Society’s early letters—and two PhD students were appointed, who combined work on the new manuscript with research on ancillary topics (19). Then, in 2007, Lisa was given a year’s full-time secondment as adviser to the Society’s collections, in the aftermath of which a major programme of outreach was planned in conjunction with the Society’s three hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 2010, though this was ultimately scaled back.

Meanwhile, there were developments in a new arena, across the North Sea. Lisa had learned Dutch when doing research on Erasmus in the 1980s, and links with Leiden and other universities in the Netherlands featured among the activities of CELL two decades later, at which point she gave various seminar presentations there. It was at this time that she transferred her scholarly attentions to Dutch history, starting with the book that she contributed to the ‘Making History’ series that she inaugurated with Amanda Foreman, a concise account of the assassination of William the Silent (18), and continuing with Going Dutch, a novel account of the intimate interrelationship between English and Dutch culture in the seventeenth century, to which the Glorious Revolution was made to seem almost a natural sequel (20). This book was focused on the Dutch royal house and on the Huygens family, of which Lisa had made a special study, and it showed all the traits that had come to typify her scholarly work: its range from art patronage and garden design to commerce and overseas colonization, from science to politics; its characteristic eye for telling detail, often from little-known sources; and its ability to make unexpected connections. It is hardly surprising that the book won the Cundill International History Prize in 2009, while in 2008–09 Lisa was made a Distinguished Visitor Fellow at The Hague by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, and in the following year was appointed Scaliger Visiting Fellow at the University of Leiden and awarded the Sarton Chair at the University of Ghent in Belgium.

**Final years**

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw Lisa take on an increasing number of public appointments. She had been a governor and trustee of the Westminster City Schools...
Lisa Jardine

Foundation a decade previously and she now took on a similar position in relation to St Marylebone Secondary School, alongside an astonishing number of further responsibilities. These involved such institutions as the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, the Royal Institution, the British Library, the Sir Joseph Banks Archive Project, Chelsea Physic Garden, and the National Archives. Perhaps above all, from 2008 to 2014 she was chair of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), a challenging role to which she rose with great dignity, being responsible for some important changes in the regulatory structure for assisted reproduction technology (ART). She also led efforts to reduce multiple births resulting from in vitro fertilization and was particularly proud of her role in overseeing the public consultation in 2012 on mitochondrial replacement—the use of a third party to prevent the transmission of harmful mutations in mitochondrial DNA. Throughout her time at the HFEA, she was tireless—if sometimes frustrated—in her attempts to get the public to recognize the complexities and human costs of ART as well as its undoubted successes.

A major change that occurred in 2012 was that Lisa left Queen Mary, finding a new academic home at University College London, where she became Professor of Renaissance Studies. CELL moved with her, and it has survived her death to become a central part of that college’s programme in the digital humanities. The year 2012 also saw further academic accolades, including the British Academy President’s Medal and the Francis Bacon Medal for the History of Science from the California Institute of Technology, which led to her spending a semester at Caltech as Distinguished Visiting Professor in 2014. She became President of the British Science Association in 2014, and in 2015 she was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society, an honour of which she was especially proud.

In these years, she continued to give public lectures and broadcasts as previously: a particular favourite was her Radio 4 series, A Point of View, in which a talk of a few minutes used some telling historical instance to reach a thought-provoking contemporary conclusion; two series of these were published in book form (21, 22), while her 2013 series on The Age of Science similarly drew on her historical research to illuminate topical issues. Right at the end of her life, her research developed in a fresh direction: she made a study of her father, whose archive she arranged to be deposited at his (and her) former college, Jesus College, Cambridge. It transpired that Bronowski had been regarded with suspicion by MI5, and a whole world of post-war intrigue opened up, which Lisa was able to recount with relish, along with other aspects of his career. She alluded to this in her 2012 Tanner lectures (24) and, had she lived, she might well have written a book on the subject. Instead, her final book was a collection of essays on Anglo-Dutch themes (25), though unpublished material relating to her studies of Renaissance humanism may yet see the light of day.

**Conclusion**

To those who knew Lisa Jardine, the overwhelming memory will be of her engaging and charismatic personality, which accounted both for her media success and for her effectiveness as a teacher and lecturer; it also does much to explain her inspiring role as the leader of a research community like CELL. Throughout her career, she displayed an extraordinary vigour, panache and empathy. She was also undoubtedly a great scholar, perhaps particularly of the world of Renaissance humanism as represented by her study of Erasmus, which, more than any of her other books, illustrated her ability to put precise textual analysis to broad interpretative ends. Her later, wider-ranging works displayed comparable skills, even if she was never quite
as at home in the fields that they covered as she had been in the milieu of her initial scholarly apprenticeship. This meant that errors and misjudgements occasionally appeared, which were pointed out by specialists; yet, she was always receptive to such criticism, as she was to comments on her radio programmes, and this humility was itself part of her charisma. What is undoubted is that her breadth of vision will make her legacy outlive that of her critics, just as her public impact during her lifetime was immeasurably greater than that of most academics. Lisa will also go down in history as a heroic champion of women. One of her last public appearances was at a meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in March 2015, at which, in a statement that she characteristically agreed to present on behalf of a group of younger scholars, she rebuked her colleagues for failing to include a single woman among the plenary speakers: it was a characteristic and effective intervention which in many ways epitomized her role and impact. Lisa Jardine was a real phenomenon, the like of which we may not see again.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

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Michael Hunter is Emeritus Professor of History at Birkbeck, University of London. He is the principal editor of the Works and Correspondence of Robert Boyle and of the digital edition of Boyle’s workdiaries published on the website of the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters (www.livesandletters.ac.uk/wd/index.html). He is also the author of Boyle: Between God and Science (2009) and many other books on the intellectual history of early modern England, most recently (with Jim Bennett) The Image of Restoration Science: The Frontispiece to Thomas Sprat’s ‘History of the Royal Society’ (1667) (2017). A member of the advisory board of the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters from 2002 to 2007, in 2003 he was one of Lisa Jardine’s co-authors in London’s Leonardo: The Life and Work of Robert Hooke. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2007.

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Lisa Jardine


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