

Gillian Beer

Born 1935.

Life story interview by Alan Macfarlane.

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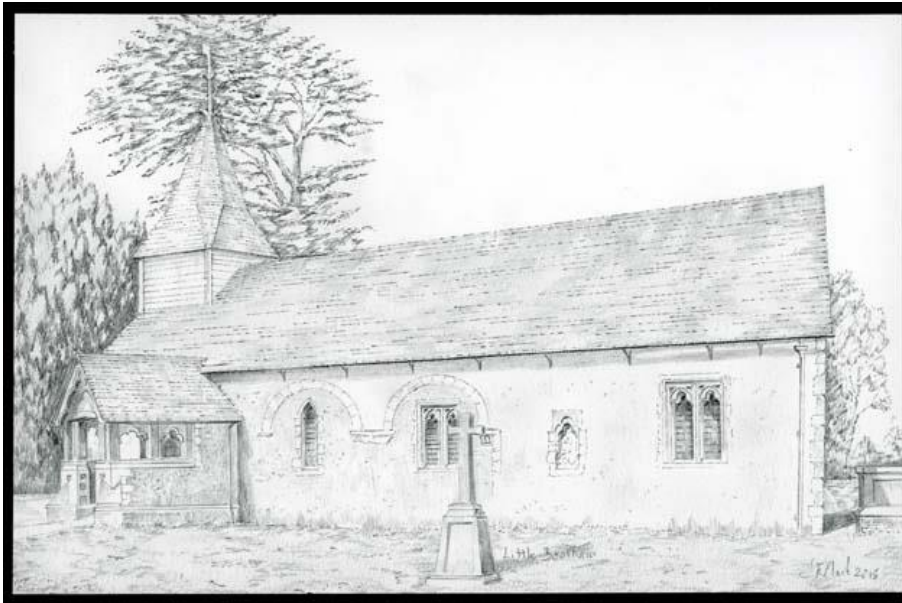


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The text of this life story is transcribed, with thanks and acknowledgement, from the collection of Filmed Interviews with Leading Thinkers at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The interview was carried out by Prof. Alan Macfarlane on 26th January 2011, and was transcribed by Sarah Harrison. The video can be accessed from this page: <http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/audiovisual.html>

1. Childhood



All Saints Church, Little Bookham, Surrey.

I was born near Little Bookham, Surrey, in 1935. I never met either of my grandfathers; my parents divorced when I was very small so I had very little knowledge of father's family; mother's father had died young at the end of the First World War. He was a living presence in the household as both grandmother and mother both felt him as loved and there. He had had quite an unusual life; he left school aged twelve and taught himself Greek, and the violin; he got to the position where he was lecturing at the St Bride's Institute for journalists. He went off to the War and died of cancer at thirty-seven, whether as a direct result is uncertain. Devastating for my grandmother, mother and her sister; it left them extremely poor.

He had been a proof-reader at the Daily Telegraph but also ran evening classes in literature at St Bride's Institute. He was clearly a man of great creativity; he was a rather beautiful man. My parents did not live together after I was four and actually divorced when I was seven. I was a small girl during the Second World War so a great many fathers were away and not having a father around didn't mark me out.

My father went into the army and my mother went back to teaching. She was a primary school teacher at Lollard Street in the East End of London. She had to take the children out of London to be evacuated; we ended up in Somerset when I was four so I consider myself as a Somerset girl. Until I was eleven we lodged with a family where the father was a bricklayer and there were two boys about my age; we were a loose extended family. Fray Bryce, the father, was a very important figure in my life; I lost touch entirely with my own father and never saw him again after I was seven.

My mother made everything possible. I had a very happy childhood; looking back I can see how hard it must have been for her. A young divorced woman, living in a small town on the Devon border. She was full of enjoyment and life; we went for long walks in the country; she always gave me the sense that anything was possible. She never seemed to feel constricted by the constrained circumstances that we lived

in. Without her I don't think I would have got to university because the school I went to did not send many people.

She was a very good singer so one of my memories was hearing her practise chromatic scales. She was in the local operatic group. She married again when I was fourteen; my stepfather was very musical and had a little madrigal group and male voice choir. My mother went on singing right through her seventies; she has been the most important person for me.

I got on well with my stepfather; sadly he died ten years after they were married. He was quite a lot older than she was; when he died there was just my mother and me again. I had no siblings; she moved to Cambridge when she retired and had twenty years here. While growing up I was always Mrs Thomas's and then Mrs Bell's daughter; when she came here she was for a month Mrs Beer's mother and then I became Mrs Bell's daughter again; she enjoyed being a grandmother to our three sons.

I only remember living in London from a memory my mother gave me; she saw the Crystal Palace burn down because we lived in Sydenham. Otherwise I can only remember picking up worms in the garden. Somerset was a bit of a muddle at first because the evacuees were taught in the afternoon and the local children in the morning, which was a bit chaotic. I then went to a dame school and later to the local infants' school; that was a bit fraught as my mother was teaching there. We moved from Martock to Wiveliscombe where I was in primary school. I remember one attractive male teacher who had been in the navy. I took 11+ and did well.

2. School



Bruton School for Girls.

We were considered to be living in poor social conditions as lodgers, so I was given a county place in a boarding school. It was then called Sunny Hill school, now Bruton School for Girls. I did not enjoy it much; having gone back as an adult I see that Bruton is a beautiful place, but I never noticed that at the time. It was a terrible wrench as I had always lived with my mother and was used to conversing with an adult.

Suddenly I was only among girls my own age and I felt deprived of conversation. There was a meagre feeling; we were not well fed. A great many people had boils and chilblains. It was not the fault of the school as it was still a very bleak period after the war.

I did have one big event which changed many things. I had a bad accident at fourteen. The school was on a hill and to get from the boarding house to classrooms one went down a very steep staircase; leaping down this, I fell backward and struck my spine badly. I was off for six months and wasn't well for a year after; that did completely change my life. In some ways it was probably the moment of opportunity because I went home and read whatever my mother could get from the library for me. I had no critical appraising capacity at all; I read a bit of Ibsen, then read all of Ibsen; same with Oscar Wilde.

Looking back I can't think how I came to choose these particular authors. I also read all of Shakespeare. I had not been a particularly academic child but in these circumstances I built up this enormous ballast of reading. Some still remains in my head, such as 'Ghosts'. I can still see my mental pictures of that play. It was a curious time. As a child, I had always had many friends, but possibly after the accident had more leisure to read and think; I notice now with our three grandchildren that they are always together, and wonder whether they ever have any solitude.

I do remember two teachers at Bruton very fondly; one was Miss Wilson, the French teacher; she had been at Girton; she was very emotional and I can remember her reading Lamartine with tears in her eyes. She was also quite brisk and comic. She had a great friend, Miss Allan, who was the geography teacher - a terrible

geography teacher, who would set us work at the beginning of the class and then sit looking out of the window. But she was a wonderful drama teacher; I used to be in a lot of plays with her. I learned a great deal from those two women and they were the delight of the place.

After my accident I could not play games and that has been a regret for me. I learned the piano and enjoyed it. I started to sing and have done a great deal of singing; I was in the school choir, and when I got to Oxford I did a great deal of singing and acting. Music has been very important for me throughout my life, both listening and taking part; I belonged to a small singing group here in Cambridge for a good many years, called the Palestrina Singers. We sang mainly Medieval and Renaissance pieces. I made friends outside the University through it, which was one of the pleasures. I have sung a lot of Gregorian chant also. I have always bought pots, starting as an undergraduate, so I have quite a large collection.



Gillian Beer with a pot.

3. Oxford University

Nobody from my school had gone to Oxford or Cambridge for ten years. One girl, Virginia Brown-Wilkinson, was the previous one, and I heard about her all the time. It was my mother who encouraged me to try for Oxford or Cambridge; I did not get in to either; I was probably very naive, in a cascade of literature rather than being organised or being good at responding to question. This was in 1954; the great mercy was that St Anne's had a separate examination about three months later than the others, and I got an exhibition.

I was fortunate that over the Christmas vacation it was clear that I had gone numb in my brain. Robert Bolt and Len Smith were living near us (Bolt later a well-known playwright). My mother arranged for me to have a couple of supervisions with them and I suddenly woke up again. I was a third year entry person so went to live in Austria for five months as I had never learnt German at school and desperately wanted to. I lived with a family in the hills outside Innsbruck and learnt German, partly through conversation, but also some lessons. I was blissfully happy there and sang a great deal within the family. When family members came they always brought their instruments. After that Oxford was an anticlimax at first; I had thought that I didn't care whether I got in, but after an interview with Dorothy Bednarowska, later my tutor and mentor, I desperately wanted to go there. I wanted to be alongside someone like her; she was so full of wit, light and sharpness. I had had my first boyfriend while in Austria and felt I was coming back to school at first; after that it was wonderful.

I was very fortunate. Dorothy Bednarowska was a superb teacher; she hardly wrote anything but taught like a demon. I went to Hugo Dyson because I did the Charles Oldham Shakespeare prize and enjoyed those supervisions enormously. He was very much part of the C.S. Lewis gang. He was not a great writer but had a probing, playful, thought-provoking intelligence that was wonderful. I heard Tolkien's lectures; one on 'Gawain and the Green Knight' I have never forgotten. He was odd and cantankerous. It was only much later when I had children that we read 'The Hobbit'; I have never got on with the other books.

I have kept in touch with a number of my contemporaries; for instance, John Carey and his wife, Gill, who was one of my good friends then. One person who influenced me a lot was Del Kolve who became a Medievalist and a professor at UCLA; in terms of studying and talking together, he and I did that the most among our contemporaries. Christopher Ricks was also around.

At the end of my undergraduate degree I hesitated and was quite drawn to being a nursery school teacher. I find the extraordinary growth of potential in early childhood so enchanting and challenging. In the end I fell into assuming that I could go on with research. I was so lucky that I was in that generation where you went to university free, and I got a state scholarship, and more for my research work.

I did the Oxford B.Litt. which was a two year course that almost all of us did. Towards the end of my second year I got my first university job, so didn't make very much of that research period. Our undergraduate course had ended with 1832 so I spent time reading all the nineteenth century figures in those two years of the

B.Litt and my dissertation was on landscape in nineteenth century fiction. A chapter of it was published in 'Victorian Studies'. My husband, John, works on Romanticism and is internationally known as a Coleridge scholar, also Wordsworth and Blake. He does also now cross over into the Victorian period. Lord David Cecil supervised my B.Litt.. In one sense he was excellent, kind and encouraging, with sudden insights like telling me to read Meredith, on whom I wrote my first book.

As far as learning to do footnotes or any apparatus was concerned, there was a blank; I don't think it even crossed his mind that I would need any instruction in the precisions of scholarship. It really fell to Kathleen Tillotson, who was the Professor at Bedford when I went there for my first job, to instruct me in that way. She did this wonderfully and I have always been grateful; she was another great model for me.

I did have the feeling at Oxford that the D.Phil. was rather frowned on. Helen Gardner was one of the great forces in my life when I was an undergraduate. I went to a marvellous class that she ran on editing Shakespeare; she was a wayward person and would encourage then reject people. For me, she had been extremely supportive and suddenly became aloof and discouraging. It happened to a number of people I knew, particularly young women. It is sad because some of my happiest memories of Oxford are lectures of hers and her class. Fortunately it didn't matter to me as she didn't do anything desperate to my career. But she did to one or two people. I went to Humphry House's lectures in my very first term, on Aristotle, and they were very good, but he died that year; John knew his family quite well.

4. Bedford College, London

I got an assistant lectureship at Bedford College, University of London, which was a women's college set in Regent's Park; the English department was in a lovely Septimus Burton villa with gardens running down to the pond.



The Decimus Burton villa in Regent's Park that housed the English department of Bedford College.

I was very happy there. Kathleen Tillotson had a regime where she thought you should really teach everything. I didn't teach any nineteenth century until my third year there. She had only recently become Professor there and for me she was a very good presence. I was on a terminable assistant lectureship although I was getting hints that they might be able to find me a job at the end of the third year. By then, John and I had met each other and wanted to marry, so I left London.

5. Manchester and Liverpool

John was teaching in Manchester and I got a part-time job at Liverpool; I also had a research fellowship in the second year. I loved the department, which was very lively. Kenneth Muir (right) was the Professor, also Miriam Allott etc. an array of people, and very friendly. The Bedford department was a little subdued in comparison. I was there from 1962-1964. The Beatles began to happen while I was there. It was a desperate time for Liverpool with much unemployment and sadness. It was a strange place because it was tragic in some ways but I remember my students getting very excited about the Beatles and feeling quite chuffed about a new thing coming out of Liverpool. I did teach quite a lot of nineteenth century and also eighteenth century and Shakespeare. I didn't teach any twentieth century at that stage but did quite a lot of American literature.



John and I had agreed that if I were offered a proper full-time job at Liverpool we would move there. Kenneth Muir offered me a permanent job and I returned to Manchester that afternoon to find that John had received a mysterious letter from Cambridge. He had been interviewed for a job there that he hadn't got but they decided later that they did want to appoint him when another job was coming up.

The letter actually came from a college that had heard that the university had appointed him but this was before he was formally approached; it was then terribly difficult to decide what to do. I had been interviewed for a fellowship at Girton just as we were getting engaged and it was made clear to me that I was very likely to get the job. I had to withdraw as John and I were getting married and I wanted to live with him in Manchester.

I was pretty confident that I would get free-lance teaching in Cambridge if nothing more. We moved and came to Cambridge, but without a job it was tough. At the end of my first year there, as I was still young enough (there were age limits in those days), Girton offered me a research fellowship. So I started right back at the beginning again.

6. Girton College Cambridge



Girton College, Cambridge.

After a couple of years I got an assistant lectureship in the University. In the end, after ten years when we were also having children, I was established; I got my Girton research fellowship on the evidence of four chapters of what became my first book, on Meredith's novels.

I have very much enjoyed teaching, supervising and lecturing, and still do a lot of lecturing and have always travelled a lot. There is always the instant gratification at the end of the hour in teaching that something has happened whereas when you are writing it is a very long haul. It hasn't really felt as if teaching were in opposition to research; in some instances it has provoked research. Certainly the work I have done on the twentieth century has come out of teaching, as has some of what I have written on the eighteenth century.

I have never found a way of incorporating into my undergraduate teaching the work that emerged in my middle life, which was more to do with scientific writing in its cultural setting, but that certainly fuelled a lot of my teaching with PhD students. These students have been one of the great resources in my life; so many of them now are long-standing good friends, and the stimulation of their conversation has been invaluable to me.

Being able to engage with people of different generations in that intimate sustained way over the whole course of a PhD means you really know each other's minds well, and you hope it flowers for both of you in different ways. I have supervised many PhD's; when I started as an assistant lecturer I kept being handed PhD students whom other people were tired of, so I had ten while still an assistant lecturer. This was very unusual in the faculty, but I have usually had about six or seven. For PhD work I would expect to supervise in nineteenth or twentieth century. In the past I did supervise eighteenth century work on the novel; at that time I was working almost entirely on narrative so could work in different periods.

7. Writing

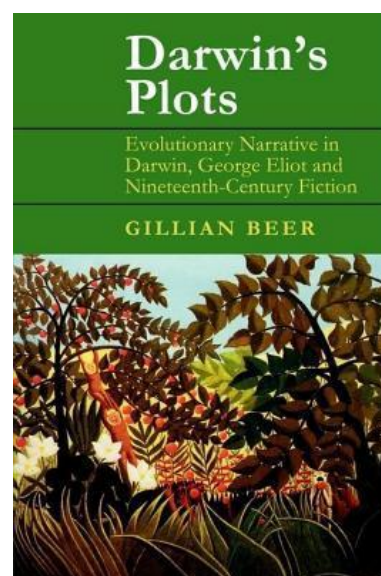
Until I had young children I hadn't been very interested in fantasy, and how it can provoke and take us through to new ideas. Watching children in the borderland between actuality and the imagined engaged me very strongly. Bearing and rearing children did make me think a great deal about evolution. It made me much more efficient in the use of time. Post-structuralism raised so many interesting new questions.

The book I did that really changed my life was 'Darwin's Plots' which came out in 1983. I was going to write a book on Victorian fantasy and rapidly realized how evolutionary ideas were troubling these fantasies; started reading more of Darwin and became engrossed with the problem of how we ever have new ideas. The children were part of this as was high theory. I did not know when I was writing it that it would have interest for people beyond literature; because I was writing it all the time in scraps and raptures between household chores, it was a very private composition.

I write in great bursts, I don't write every day; I balk at writing for some time and things build up and I finally write fast; I have a study where we live but I used to write in my College room at Girton. We also have a cottage and when the children were young I would sometimes go there for a few days if I had a deadline. When writing the Darwin book there was one chapter that I was having difficulty with. I went to the cottage, took out my typewriter and started to write at once.

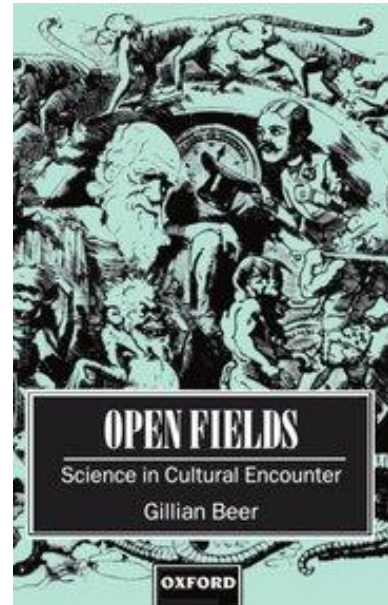
I am left-handed and people have always had trouble with my writing, especially if done under pressure. My mother gave me a typewriter when I became a graduate student. I always wrote on that, and later on a word-processor and computer. On writing itself, when I look back I can't tell the difference between those pages I wrote with enormous freedom and brio and those that I struggled through. I sometimes think that I write for the bliss of the twenty minutes when I stop writing. With young academics now, people are forced onward into publication after publication without enough time for reverie. I do think that a kind of vagrancy of imagination is really crucial for work that will drive you beyond where you foresaw that you could get to. When I was doing the work on Darwin I came to realize quite fast that when an idea is first proposed it is at its most fictive because it doesn't fit, it is counter-intuitive. That is a very important phase for any writer and for the making of ideas.

'Darwin's Plots' considers the stories that Darwin had to think with and the stories that he generated for other people; about what he imbibed and how he turned or troubled some of those ideas. When he was growing up the idea of design was dominant and he was delighted by Paley; what he needed to find was a way of thinking in opposition to or angle from design, towards production. In the first part



of the book I look at his language and argue that the language can't just be skimmed off leaving the ideas intact. He uses familiar metaphors but turns them away from the assumptions of the time; because he wrote in the 'Origin' in a discourse that would be readable by any intelligent, reasonably informed, person of his time. It actually left a great surplus of meaning lying around. In the second half of the book I look at some of the ways in which other writers spun out from Darwin, either at the level of structure or allusion, to argue with his ideas.

I have done another book 'Open Fields: science in cultural encounter' which is a set of essays on the exchanges between scientific writing and its cultural setting, including several on Darwin. I have been doing new work on Darwin because of the celebrations, thinking about ideas of consciousness across other organic life and the importance of the arts in Darwin's thinking. Tennyson's line, 'nature, red in tooth and claw', was written before either Darwin or Chambers in 'Vestiges of Creation'. And Darwin could hardly have lived through the 1850's without being aware of 'In Memoriam', so these chimes go both ways.



The writers I write about in 'Darwin's Plots' are Charles Kingsley, Mrs Gatty, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, and a little bit about Dickens. You could write about almost anybody after Darwin and relate them to his work because it seeps into the culture. But I wanted to write about people who we could show had read and reacted to Darwin.



Knuffle Bunny were the first words Trixie said.

Recently I gave a book to one of our twin granddaughters who was under three and was then passionately attached to her toy rabbits and baby dolls etc.. It was a book

by Mo Willems, about a little girl and her father who go to the launderette and her toy rabbit gets put in the machine. There is a scene of ecstasy where the rabbit is found and the little girl speaks words for the first time. I noticed that for the children, the finding was the important thing. For adults, the first words. My granddaughter fetched her toy rabbit and very tenderly put it against the page to greet the found rabbit. I could feel what she was feeling but couldn't quite articulate how she imagined these two worlds, within the book and outside the book. I find that so inspiring to be alongside again. I think you can get these fragmentary moments where you recollect how something did come out of a book when you were a child.

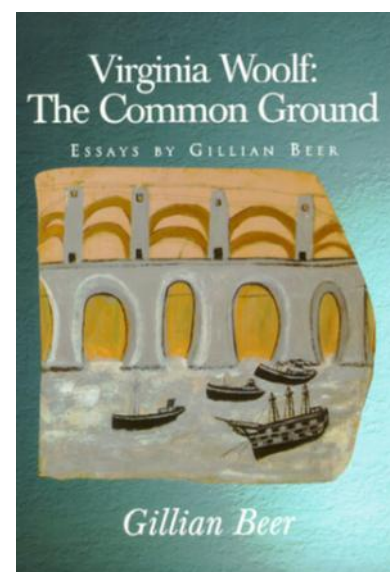
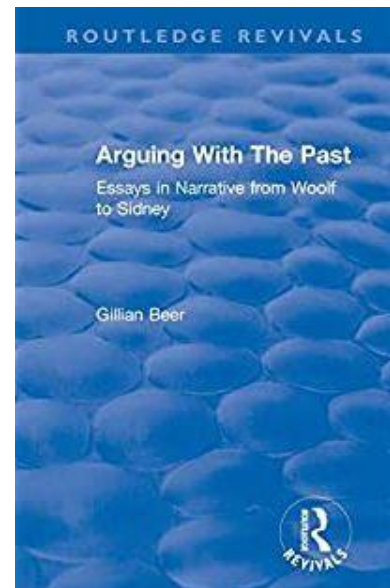
'Arguing with the Past' is a set of essays about narrative, subtitled 'from Woolf to Sidney'. I was wanting to get away from the evolutionist metaphor that writing gets more and more complex. Also wanting to watch how writers transform their predecessors by reading them. I was not attracted by Harold Bloom's idea of the anxiety of influence as though the past is oppressive and has to be fought with. I was much more interested in the collaborative process that takes place.

There are several essays about Virginia Woolf and her reading of other writers. There is an essay about Samuel Richardson and Philip Sidney, about 'Arcadia' and 'Pamela'. Each of the essays was a conversation between books; another way of thinking about how creativity works.

I wrote a set of essays on Virginia Woolf - I really like working in essay length - called 'The Common Ground'; again I was very struck by Woolf's capacity to re-imagine the world, and how she reinvents between each book as they are all so different; by calling it 'The Common Ground' I really wanted to express how much Woolf writes for any of us.

She knew herself how she was somewhat imprisoned by not being able to register working-class speech without it sounding faintly comic. I have had two especially happy experiences in teaching. I went to the United States and was teaching at a summer school in a small liberal arts college. The group I had were all local people, and 'The Waves' had been set.

They hated it at first and then they became fascinated by it and felt they understood it, and that it was their lives. It was an extraordinary process, which I shared in because I had found 'The Waves' difficult at first, where we were all discovering things about ourselves. The other was at the end of a term where we had a seminar on speaking poetry. I said I had always



wanted to do a complete reading through of 'The Waves'; six people volunteered, and we read it aloud from ten in the morning until nine at night. It was so revelatory, comic, very moving, and I remember two of the women saying that they now knew what it felt like to be middle-aged, or to be old.

I was at Girton when we changed from being a women's college to a mixed one. It was striking that our life fellows tended to support the change for practical reasons, as we have always been out on the edge of Cambridge, but also because they thought the college had been set up to draw in people who didn't have the opportunities for higher education and thought we should try to encourage students from all backgrounds. When I first went there, Mary Cartwright was the Mistress, a shy mathematician; once she retired she changed totally, became very talkative and travelled the world. Muriel Bradbrook followed. I was Vice-Mistress when Mary Warnock was Mistress.

I found Girton a bit difficult at first after St Anne's; the latter was very free and easy and Girton was crusted in gothic ornament and tradition. I became Edward VII Professor in 1994 in succession to Marilyn Butler. I had been the Grace One Professor before that from 1989. Curiously enough the King Edward came just as I had been approached to become President of Clare Hall. When I was first made a professor there were so few women professors in Cambridge that inevitably one got enquiries about standing for head of house, and I had said no to everybody because I thought I would never write again if I took on such a post. When Clare Hall came along, partly because it is a graduate college and also it is so international with many visiting fellows, living on site, and no high table, I felt I could do it and learn from it; it is a seven year stint and I enjoyed it enormously.

Christopher Ricks preceded Marilyn Butler, and followed Frank Kermode (right). One of the happiest times that I recollect with Frank was that he had had a very creative seminar at UCL and started something similar here when he came. He asked me to do it with him. It was on narrative of all kinds; we did have a good time for a couple of years. People of all sorts came. I've always been rather sorry that we didn't go on collaborating. He also read one of my books before publication and gave me some encouragement.



I was around during the problem with Colin McCabe's failure to be upgraded to a full lectureship; a lot of people, including me, felt this was not fair. There was a lot of acrimony, which was very sad; it did leave some scars for a number of years. This was some time ago in 1981; the department has always been eclectic and that is its strength. I think there has been a turn in academia in general, from undue modesty to undue boastfulness, under the pressure of the research assessment exercise. I think the new assertiveness has some good effects as it makes you more aware of what your colleagues are doing, and many are doing interesting things.

8. Reflections



From 1994 to 2001 Gillian Beer was President of the graduate college Clare Hall, Cambridge.

My mother was notionally Church of England during my childhood. Later she became a Quaker and much happier there, and did quite a lot of national work in later life. It came initially because we lived in Street in the latter part of our time in Somerset; a very Quaker-dominated place.

I think like so many English people I have a joy in the music, without having any belief in the afterlife or the idea of a personal God. I have respect for Jesus Christ as an endlessly thought-provoking man, which has grown. I used to go with my mother quite often to Quaker meetings and I like the Quaker set-up, but I didn't continue going after her death. Clare Hall is a secular foundation, so as President I was never expected to participate in religious ceremonies. Brian Pippard, the first President, would have been appalled if we had had anything like that. At Girton, where I was Vice-Mistress, we were much more Anglican. Grace is not said at Clare Hall as it is such an international community.

At the moment I am doing a number of different essays around the subject of consciousness, not just between humans and animals, but climbing plants, oysters; Darwin was so interested in questions of intent and will; that goes back to language because human language can't easily get outside the question of intent; I have a book on the Alice books which is about 90% written which I must finish; there is another book that I have been writing for years and have published bits of, called 'Experimental Islands'; it is about the idea of the island and island populations, how it has been studied in fiction and poetry, and also some of the sciences; I find it quite hard to finish things, so closing them down and putting them out I find very difficult to do; I think I feel they could be better if I wait a little, and probably I am rather timid.

I have been on the Booker judges twice, have chaired the Poetry Book Society, and am now President of the British Comparative Literature Association and the British Literature and Science Society. I have very much enjoyed involving myself in those ways.

9. Family

Three Sons

Our three sons have been a great expansion of the possibilities of life. We are quite close to each other and see a lot of them. One is married and has three children and a lovely wife, they live rather far away in Liverpool.

Dan, our eldest son, published a book on Foucault and is now a schoolmaster, teaching modern languages. Rufus, our next son, was a social worker for ten years then retrained as a primary school teacher, which he loves. Zach, the youngest, did an art degree and then a degree in molecular biology, and has now gone back to art.

Lost Cousins Found

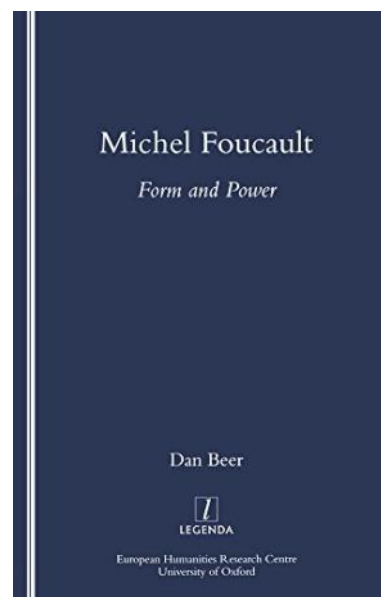
I never saw my father again after I was seven. I have no knowledge of him really, and never wished to get in touch with him. About eighteen months ago one evening I went to my email. We were just about to have an Australian friend in to supper. And there was this email headed 'Long Lost Cousin?'. It might have been one of those wilful things people put. But I read two sentences and realised this was real.

Because what had happened, and it's really my mother's story, was that she had a lover that she was deeply attached to, called John. Her family was very poor. His family was poor. He terribly wanted to get an education, and there was no way he could get to university here, it was just beyond them. So he went to Canada, and he was going to come back. And she waited and waited, and he hadn't reappeared. And she began to think he wasn't going to come back. And she married his brother, who was my father. And that marriage didn't work out well.

I had always known that somewhere in Canada there must be a family, but I never knew anything more about this John, except that she always spoke with great warmth and joy of him. They had had a lovely time together. And suddenly there they were. And they had found me. And I had always thought it would be impossible, because he was called John Thomas, my father was Owen Thomas, the most obvious names in the world. But I have a third name Kempster, which they have kept up. So this was John's family, and his four children who start about eight years younger than me.

They said they had been looking for me for a long time, and suddenly there they were. And they have told me a lot more about my father. We haven't actually met face to face yet, but we are going to later in the year.

They have told me a lot more about the background to that family, and their struggles and difficulties. Because apparently the two brothers never spoke again. I knew nothing of that. But I do now understand I think a bit more about the



pressures that all those young people in that generation were under. These upper working class or lower middle class intelligent people who had no way through, and how some of them found good lives. My mother was one who found a good life, against the odds. And John did, against the odds. And I really still don't know whether my father did or not.
