

## Michael Hunter

President, Master, Distinguished Governor, Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues

Thunderstorms, frisky friars, and scruples: are these what modern science is made of? Perhaps. There are other contenders, admittedly, but I want to suggest that science – or experimental natural philosophy, as it was known in the seventeenth century – started its long gestation in the 1630s and 1640s when a young man called Robert Boyle embarked on a Grand Tour of France, Switzerland, and Italy. Like Martin Luther (that seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation a century earlier), a severe thunderstorm made him aware that he was not prepared for the Day of Judgement. On that same Tour – during which he visited brothels (and emerged virginity intact) and had an encounter with two randy friars (or “gown’d Sodomites” as he put it) but again emerged from the encounter as pure as ever – his personality took form. One of the world’s greatest scientists, Boyle was a man for whom religious and scientific scruples were intertwined, setting the scene for the meticulous work required by the modern scientific discipline.

This is the man whom Michael Cyril William Hunter – whom we honour today – has given to us. And he has given so much more as well. Hunter is the most intellectually powerful, dynamic, and inspirational historian of seventeenth-century intellectual history and the history of science.

Hunter is not a man to sound his own trumpet: his generosity and modesty are legendary. So it is now not only my honour, but my pleasure also, to be given this opportunity to publicly make him squirm with embarrassment. It is a rare pleasure to be able to praise in public a colleague and long-standing friend.

So who is Michael Hunter? He was born in 1949 and grew up under the copper green tower

of the downland church of Harting, West Sussex. His father, Frank, was the rector who became an honorary chaplain to the queen. His mother, Olive, was an artist. Both died tragically young.

Hunter was always an intellectual. Between 1968 and 1972, he read history at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he was the joint winner of the Cambridge University Gordon Duff Prize. He gained his D.Phil. at Worcester College, Oxford, where he was a Junior Research Fellow until 1975. From there, he went to University of Reading but hankered for a really dynamic, intellectual home, which he found at Birkbeck in 1976. It is no wonder he never wanted to leave.

Hunter can boast a formidable portfolio of books, articles, and online resources. His range is astounding. If I listed each one, this ceremony would be excessively prolonged so I hope Hunter will not be offended if I mention my personal favourites. There is his work on the institutionalisation of science, the relationship between science and technologies such as optical instruments, the social and political milieu of scientists and their patrons, the celestial mechanics of Robert Hooks, and the force of atheism, which flourished in coffeehouses in early modern Britain and (as Thomas Fuller put it in 1642), “ulcers men’s hearts with profanese”. Most of all, he had delineated the role of magical philosophies in the development of science. Hunter is also the leading scholar on the Royal Society, painting a picture of “naivety, disappointment and opportunities missed” while still giving credit to this group of extraordinary men for having created a new science. Wittily, he entitled the introductory chapter, “The Importance of Being Institutionalized”.

Hunter is a master-editor. He has edited all 14 volumes of Boyles’ works – making this the first such undertaking since the 1744 edition compiled by the cleric Thomas Birch. Additionally, Hunter has edited six volumes of Boyle’s correspondence and created an electronic edition of Boyles’ Workdiaries.

Innovation in visual media has been equally important. He directed a project for a digital library of British printed images from 1700, fundamentally changing the way we think about the images. It turns out that simple woodblock scenes can tell us as much about ideologies, tastes, humour, and everyday life as do the more elaborate engraved plates. To this we must add his interest in Victorian architecture, heritage, and the development of King's Cross.

The sheer quality of his work makes Hunter's intellectual labours unparalleled. His confident grasp of the connections between science, politics, and religion marks his analyses. He extols historians not to be too enthralled by grand categories, but to pay attention to individual complexities. As he rightly says, we must treat those men in the seventeenth century as whole beings. They invented the empirical and iconoclastic ethos of modern science, and were "assertive of its ability not only to understand nature but also to control it". No one has done more than Hunter in showing how this revolution came about.

It is understandable, then, that Hunter's lifework has always circled around that great, complex, bewildering figure of Robert Boyle. To understand Boyle, one has to understand the incredibly difficult science of the seventeenth century. It was science, but not as we know it. Boyle was interested in second sight and related phenomena because he believed this would help defend the Christian religion by showing the existence of a realm of the spirit. He experimented with alchemy – the possibility that base metals might be transmuted into gold – even though he feared that this might imperil his immortal soul.

For all its weirdness to modern, scientific ears, Boyle's re-conception of nature and God transformed western science and culture. Boyle believed that Nature was neither wise, nor purposeful, but should best be seen as "operating by mechanical processes under the ultimate control of an infinite, personal god". His vision did not lead to the separation of religion and science. Quite the contrary. For Boyle, the world was "made up of matter acting according to properties and powers given to it by God".

Hunter is able to show how Boyle's complex personality both contributed to and thwarted his scientific work. He was scrupulous in his religious and laboratory practices. In faith, he was profoundly pious, a fact that caused him great anguish since he feared that he had committed the deadly sin against the Holy Ghost. His concerns about the moral propriety of taking oaths cost him the presidency of the Royal Society in 1680. In the laboratory, too, he admitted that he "made conscience of great exactness in Experiments". Hunter's biography of the scientist, Boyle: Between God and Science, won both the Samuel Pepys Award and the Roy G. Neville Prize. It is a great read. I wholeheartedly recommend it.

Perhaps Hunter's abilities in understanding Boyle are also a reflection of his own complexities. Hunter is a deeply serious, profound thinker. In scholarship, he is scrupulous himself – persistent in pursuing all manuscripts and knowing everything about whatever subject he explores. Hunter's own attention to detail is celebrated: he would return student essays and dissertations with every misplaced comma or apostrophe neatly corrected in pencil. Like Boyle, he is renowned for his benevolent disposition and is disdainful of those who (in Boyle's words, I hasten to say, not Hunter's) "squander away a whole afternoone in tatling of this Ladys Face & tother Lady's Clothes; of this Lords being Drunke & that Lord's Clap".

But where Boyle was pious and a bit of a prude, Hunter embraces life and exudes energy. After a day of serious scholarship, he changes into his leathers and mounts one of his motorbikes. He favours the lighter, faster, two-stroke and small V4 racing bikes, some of the most peppy bikes on the road. This passion has not only put his own life at great risk on at least three occasions but also nearly killed me as I was crossing Russell Square one afternoon.

Of course, no sketch of Hunter would be complete without mentioning his hospitality. Friends, colleagues, and students have made the trip to his home in Hastings. On the outside, Exmouth House is a fine English Heritage listed building. Inside, we find the house

of an intellectual, heaving with books, prints, watercolours, and a kitchen-table generously laden with wine or beer. Visitors are treated to tours of the Old Town, a refuelling at the best Fish and Chips shop on the south coast, and then a walk along the cliffs.

Finally, Hunter exemplifies Birkbeck's mission to provide our students with research-led teaching of internationally renowned quality, to nurture ideas and stimulate debate, and, most of all, to strive to improve the worlds in which we live. He had a "gentle way of nagging", one former PhD student told me. Another added, "he's got high standards and a way of making you want to do things to please him". The affection and warmth that they and, us, his colleagues have for him is palpable. He is the ultimate Birkbeck Scholar.

For these reasons, and a great many more, it is my personal pleasure to welcome Professor Michael Hunter – my much-admired friend, colleague, scholar, motorcyclist – as Fellow of Birkbeck.