

Report of July 2014 Meeting Royal Society Southern Highlands Branch

Speaker: Emeritus Professor Clive Probyn
Professor of English, Monash University, 1982-2009

Topic: “Extracting Sunbeams out of Cucumbers: the Royal Society and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*”

Modern science arose from some very murky backgrounds and some very strange projects. In the 17th century, it was difficult to separate the winners from the losers, the inspired from the lunatic. The Royal Society of London (1660) was to transform our ways of seeing and knowing things, but to do that it had to first fight its own battles against ignorance, fear and prejudice.

Professor Probyn spoke of how projects to fix the date of the Universal Flood and bizarre proposals to fix the longitude went alongside astonishing discoveries in microscopy, astronomy, cell biology, mathematics, geography and comparative anthropology. He described how one man in particular turned his literary genius onto the New Science, his troubled response becoming the great classic *Gulliver’s Travels*. Probyn’s illustrated talk examined both the science and the satire, and proposed that questions put by Jonathan Swift in 1726 are still being put today.

The Society’s founder and patron was Charles II, who immediately declared himself a Fellow of it. The Royal Society of London was founded in 1660 and incorporated in 1662; the Great Plague ravaged the nation’s capital in 1665; the great Fire of London destroyed about two thirds of the city’s buildings, but took only 5 lives, in 1666. Just one year later appeared the *History of the Royal Society of London*, only seven years after its inception. Probyn suggested that this was surely a response to the New Science’s phenomenally rapid rise in England, and an attempt to account for its national and international cultural significance.

Before 1660, there was no concept of ‘science’ as we would recognize it, that is, as a special sort of intellectual discipline or method. There was as yet no group of people who would identify themselves as *scientists*. Probyn is of the view that when research finally began to coalesce around a particular group of like-minded men, it was not surprising that a merchant’s private house in Bishopsgate Street was chosen for their activities, not a university college. It became known as Gresham College, and the Royal Society met there from 1660 to 1710, where a room and an ‘elaboratory’ were provided for those who ‘elaborated’ in the fields of physic, music divinity, rhetoric, astronomy and law.

In Probyn's wide ranging and fascinating illustrated lecture, case histories of numerous early scientists were given. One of them was Isaac Newton who spent most of his life attempting to 'prove' the truth of the Biblical version of human history by his work in geology and archaeology. Probyn stated that Newton's work owed as much to medieval number mysticism as to modern mathematics. Bishops were men of science, and scientists wrote books on theology – this was the norm. Specialization among the scientists was neither necessary nor common. Newton became president of the Royal Society in 1703, having been employed analyzing and weighing the coinage since 1696 in his role of Master of the Royal Mint. Newton never lost his interest in theology.

Much of Probyn's commentary focused on the year 1727, because so many notable events occurred then. It was the year that Sir Isaac Newton died, the year *Gulliver* was published in its corrected edition, the year that Charles II died, the year that Jonathan Swift reached 60, and the year that J.S.Bach wrote his sacred oratorios in Leipzig.

A summary such as this can barely do justice to Professor Clive Probyn's presentation. It was clear however from the questions that members of the 90 person audience asked of him that they had enjoyed the lecture very much and had been challenged by it.

Anne Wood