

John Forrester

From Marina Warner

Revised 6 December 2015

The historian and philosopher John Forrester, who has died aged 66 after protracted treatment for cancer, brought the study of psychoanalysis, its history, dramatis personae, clinical practice and social significance, to the very centre of academic concerns, and shaped the intellectual climate for his generation and its successors in this country - and farther afield. Occupying a key position at Cambridge, in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS), this brilliant, deft, and warm-hearted man brought boundless curiosity, scrupulous attention to detail, unsurpassed stores of information and tough questioning to bear on Freud's talking cure and its place in the modern and contemporary world. From his PhD thesis, which was immediately published as *Language and the Origins of Psychoanalysis* (1980) and instantly translated into French, to the magnum opus *Freud in Cambridge*, which he had just completed when he fell ill again, John Forrester was passionately engaged with his subject, but, being *au fond* a follower of the French Enlightenment, he was never a zealot. He continually enjoyed the conundrum that psychoanalysis - which he recognised had aspects of a faith or even a cult - presented to a sceptic of his rationalist temper. His life's ambition, he explained to his daughter, was to reconcile Freud, the doctor of the soul with Foucault, the critic of medical regimes of all kinds. He brought a historian's empirical mind to the task while practising the analytic method of watching out for inconsistencies and contradictions, where the deepest meanings would emerge. Publications such as the 1996 paper, 'If p, then what? Thinking in cases' remain classics in the field (another forthcoming volume will collect twenty years' worth of further exploring along these lines). He was also a highly effective catalyst: over the decades, he organised crucial interactions, seminars and reading groups, including a famous series when French practitioners came to England for the first time to meet and talk with luminaries in the humanities, such as Frank Kermode and Malcolm Bowie. Difficult and sensitive subjects attracted John: in 1986 he wrote a provocative essay on 'Rape, Seduction, and Psychoanalysis', and followed that with *Truth Games* (1997), a fascinating, slippery book about different ways of lying - to oneself and others. At the time of his death, he was involved in a major Wellcome-funded research project about reproduction, IVF, surrogacy, genetic modification, and gender assignment. From 2007-2013, at a time of strain on academic values, he ran HPS adroitly and resiliently.

In lectures as well as books he was filled with a playful appetite for experience and knowledge, and was a gifted storyteller. An essay on the wary, prickly interactions of Freud and Einstein shows his acute insight into human character, while *Freud's Women* (1992), written in collaboration with his lifelong partner the writer Lisa Appignanesi, displayed the couple's exciting archival archaeology and flair for dramatic portraits. They show how family and friends sustain a great man, and unfold the crucial role that female patrons, analysts, and his daughter and successor, Anna, played in Freud's life and thought.

An imposing figure, even when he was young, John could appear scary, as it was clear he knew so much and thought so clearly. He had a domed head that made him, especially after chemotherapy, somewhat resemble an Oriental sage. He could be tenacious in argument, but his voice was unexpectedly gentle and confiding. Some political issues (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) used to spark tense disagreements among his friends. In a quiet, rather feline way, John could also be mischievous. At his inaugural lecture as Professor at Cambridge, he told us that Michael Ramsey (the future Archbishop of Canterbury) aged 6 or so, announced 'When I grow up, I am going to marry Mummy.' To which Frank, his elder brother, the future mathematician and logician, replied, "Don't be silly, you know you can't unless Daddy dies."

Later in life, he was wonderfully fulfilled, and became remarkably affable ('John could draw the finest thread of silver from the most leaden of clouds', said one friend.) He was always full of shrewd observations and zest for a whole range of pleasures: he grew splendid dahlias and, latterly, roses, and was an expert plantsman; he knew his clarets, followed rugby, cricket, and football avidly, adored J. S. Bach and Schubert, the playing of Alfred Brendel, and the grace of Roger Federer; competed at chess to a high level on his computer, loved to wander in Paris where he was very much at home (ever since he translated Lacan's 1953-55 *Seminar*, he knew the language well), and chuckled over Proust's barbed observations and the differences between the English and the French ways of viewing the world. The irreverence of his stepson Josh Appignanesi, the filmmaker and screen writer, was emboldened by John's company; his daughter Katrina Forrester, the historian of political thought, her partner Jamie Martin (also an historian), and his daughter-in-law, the literary philosopher Devorah Baum, all acknowledge his crucial inspiration. At the family table with Lisa (they were married in 2013), passionate discussions stirred their ambitions and raised their expectations. Likewise, an extraordinary roster of students whom John supervised has spread out across the world: they include Alison Winter, who wrote a seminal study of Mesmerism as her PhD thesis under John, and Darian Leader, the psychoanalyst. All pay heartfelt tribute to his importance in their lives. He encouraged ceaseless questioning, always listened well and was himself judicious with his words even as he gave generously of his time.

John was born and brought up in North London; his father Reginald went to LSE and marched with his future wife, Minnie Chaytow, against Mosley. He became a senior international civil servant in the OEEC after the war, worked on the Marshall Plan, and later, set up as an independent consultant. He died when John was 21. His mother became a social worker (a 'lady almoner'), having taken a degree as a mature student at the Open

University. John went to Haberdashers' Aske's in the last years of its direct grant status, and then on to King's College Cambridge, to read Natural Sciences. He was awarded a Fulbright, and went on to Princeton where he worked with Thomas Kuhn, whose ideas spurred his seminal approach to case studies. He then returned to King's and Cambridge; he was made a Professor in 2000. He was invited constantly to speak abroad— and held visiting posts in the US, Brazil, France, Italy, and Germany; he spent a particularly productive and happy year in Paris in 1993-4. But his home was in North London with Lisa, whom he met in 1985 when, as deputy director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts she invited him, presciently, to take part in a series about Desire.

John Forrester was that rare intellectual: a hedgehog *and* a fox, in the terms explored by Isaiah Berlin, since there was nothing he didn't know about his subject, but he was also curious about - and good at - almost everything else. His work changed the contours of a discipline and has fertilised the thought of a scholarly and clinical community worldwide. He leaves a sore emptiness in many different worlds.

John Forrester, historian, philosopher, academic. 25 August 1949- 24 November 2015

<http://www.people.hps.cam.ac.uk/index/teaching-officers/forrester/obituary>