



# islington



## **MONTHLY MEETINGS 2014-15**

Every month except August and September, Islington U3A holds a monthly meeting to which we invite a high profile, interesting and entertaining speaker – and 2014-15 saw continued success in attracting excellent speakers. The meetings noted below are for the iU3A year which started in October 2014. A similar compendium will be published for 2015-16 and for following years.

What appears below is almost exactly what appeared on the website immediately after each meeting. It has not been updated except for the odd typo that slipped through first time around. That means that some of the talks should be read in context. For example, Margaret Hodge was succeeded in June 2015 by Meg Hillier as chair of the PAC – though her concerns seem as topical as ever. Indeed, all of the talks remain of interest, either in our local context or more widely, and so well worth a second visit...

### **October 2014 Margaret Hodge MP**

#### **Following the taxpayer's pound**

Margaret Hodge introduced herself as the first 'queen' of the 'queen of select committees' when she came to talk to Islington U3A in October, as she is the first woman to chair the powerful Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

She is also a former leader of Islington Council, a London MP and potential mayoral candidate, but she came to talk to us about her role as guardian of the taxpayer's pound.



She is the first person to have been elected to chair the PAC, and, she said, being elected by the whole house and not just her own party (Labour), gives the role added authority and influence. Having a secure five-year tenure helps her plan the committee's work.

She has the power to command people to appear before the committee – with the sanction of imprisonment in the Tower of London if they refuse. Civil servants, captains of industry and others who are accountable have been called before her committee – but rarely politicians.

Working with just one researcher, Margaret has recently been looking into the NHS's ineffective spending on Tamiflu, and had asked Dame Sally Davies the Chief Medical Officer for an account of the decision. She admitted that Sellafield and its expensive problem of getting rid of nuclear waste has become one of her obsessions. She will soon be looking at the cost of medical negligence claims.

There is a very long list of her areas of concern: the Work Programme, which she branded "a complete mess"; the HS2 rail line; and the privatisation of the Probation Service. The PAC looks back on what has already happened, so in her early days, Margaret was examining what had happened under Labour. "I showed myself willing to criticise Labour's record, including Gordon Brown's decision to commission two new aircraft carriers, more to boost jobs than Britain's defence capability. That gave me credibility," she said.

Margaret reads *Private Eye* and is grateful for the whistle-blowers who bring information to her attention. "I am just about the only MP who has a good word to say about journalists," she told the packed iU3A audience.

As well as turning its sights on a range of government spending, the PAC

investigates HMRC's tax collection work. "It's a moral issue. We all make a compact with society to pay into the common pot according to our means, so it is a moral imperative as well as a legal one." She put the spotlight on the tax arrangements of Starbucks, and has stopped using



Amazon. "My agenda is not an anti-business agenda – it's a fairness agenda. The more that big corporations don't pay tax, the more burden falls on small businesses and the likes of John Lewis. It gets my goat when big businesses say 'we pay other taxes'. We all pay other taxes like VAT."

She has particular contempt for the Big Four tax firms' role in advising corporations on ways to avoid taxes. Her mission, in contrast is to secure best value for taxpayers so their hard earned money can be spent wisely by the government to transform society.

## **November 2014 Roberta Cremoncini**

### **The Estorick Gallery**



The grand 1816 house on a corner of Canonbury Square, Islington had an interesting history before it became the home of Italian Futurist art in London, Roberta Cremoncini, Director of the Estorick Gallery, told the November monthly meeting of iU3A. It has been an artificial flower factory and the office of architect Sir Basil Spence.

But now it is the setting for a core permanent collection of 122 works and a programme of special Italian art exhibitions. Roberta said that Eric Estorick was not Italian, but a colour blind American writer and sociologist.

In the 1940s he wrote two biographies of Sir Stafford Cripps and became interested in England. He met his future wife and partner in art collecting, Salome Dessau, on the Queen Elizabeth on the way home to America. They married within three months and settled in England. Her family ran a lingerie business. She was a textile designer and found employment with Marks & Spencer, which had bought from her family textile firm. He wrote a history of the company.

Eric Estorick had been involved in left wing circles in America, and was far from being a fascist sympathiser, said Roberta. But in 1948 on a trip to Italy the couple filled up their car with Futurist Italian art.

They became great collectors and after Eric's death in 1993, a foundation was set up by his children to preserve the collection. The most important picture in the collection, Roberta said, is Umberto Boccioni's Modern Idol, 1911 which shows a woman wearing a flowery hat, out at night with her face illuminated by the new invention – electric lighting.

## January 2015 Simon Webley

### Is doing business ethically a nightmare?

Simon is the Research Director of the Institute of Business Ethics, which was set up in 1986 after the 'Big Bang' in the City. Business leaders realised that they could no longer rely on integrity under the banner "my word is my bond" to ensure fair ethical business behaviour.

The London based Institute helps organisations develop and implement business ethics policies and practices. It does not provide template ethics policies - those have to be developed within the business - but it can give



guidance. Simon pointed out that doing ethical things is not a substitute for doing things ethically, which is harder. Good practice should pervade every aspect of the business. For instance, he said, Tesco may help to get computers into schools, but that does not mitigate its obligation to treat suppliers fairly, and does not alone make it an ethical company.

Hot topics in business ethics are executive pay and pay differentials; harassment and discrimination, speak-up policies (to encourage people to speak up before the deed is done rather than whistle-blowing which happens after the event); late payments and openness with information.

Simon collects 'Red Flags' - phrases that indicate that something unethical is taking place: 'No one will ever know'; 'We didn't have this conversation'; 'It isn't specifically forbidden'; and 'I don't think I'll take a holiday this year'.

He believes that everyone should be made to realise that they are responsible for the ethics of an organisation. He applauded Shell, which sent employees a fridge magnet mirror, with the legend: 'You are looking at the person responsible for business ethics at Shell'.



Business ethics are not easy, he concluded, but you can always fall back on the universal adage: Do unto others...

Simon's interesting talk led to many questions from members.

## **February 2015 Esther Rantzen**

### **From ChildLine to Silver Line**



Esther gave an illuminating talk about her reasons for setting up The Silver Line and some of the things that happened when she set about doing so. She admitted that she was lonely when she found herself living alone and watching the TV on her own after her husband died. She wrote about that in a newspaper and, before long, the woman who had set up ChildLine had set up The Silver Line, a 24-hour confidential helpline offering friendship, advice and information to older people to combat loneliness.

"I got letters saying I was brave to be honest because there's a stigma to loneliness – like child abuse" she told iU3A's monthly meeting.

She repeated The Silver Line telephone number – 0800 4708090 FREE – several times so no one would forget it.

Calls to The Silver Line are free and are answered by staff at a call centre near Blackpool. They find out whether the caller would welcome a regular call from a matched Silver Line volunteer. Then the volunteer will call them once a week for a chat.

Esther read from a letter from Beryl who had been linked with a Silver Line volunteer. She wrote: "I was able to talk openly to a complete stranger. I felt so secure." After the first good long telephone chat, she said that she had slept soundly for the first time since her husband died.

Silver Line also has a letter writing service and will set up conference calls called Silver Circle Groups. One man in a Silver Circle said that it was the first time in five years that he had talked to more than one person at a time.

The Silver Line received a £5m grant from the Big Lottery Fund in 2013 to pay half its costs over two years. "We are expensive," admitted Esther. "Not just because we pick up the cost of the calls, but also because we have paid staff picking up the initial calls. But that means we can staff up or down according to demand."

In its first year it was taking about 1,000 calls a day. Esther urged iU3A members at the meeting to think about becoming volunteers. A lovely question and answer session followed the talk. When asked whether Silver Line volunteers would recommend that people join their local U3A, Esther said "yes, absolutely".

## **March 2015 Steve Jones**

### **Nature, nurture or neither - the view from the genes**



The most dangerous word in genetics, according to Steve Jones, the popular science author and Emeritus Professor of Genetics at University College, London, is 'for', as in "gene for...". He told the March monthly meeting of Islington U3A that genetics and inheritance was much more complex.

He contrasted the sticking out ears of the King of Greece inherited by Prince Philip, Prince Charles and Prince Harry with the inheritance of royal wealth and privilege that has also passed through the generations. "Things handed down in families are not necessarily genetic", he told the packed meeting.

Similarly, Siamese cats inherit their colour from their parents, but it is also influenced by melanin. The production of this pigment is affected by

temperature and causes the darker fur on cooler areas of the cat's body - the 'points' (ears, tail, nose etc.) So the cat's overall colour is a product of both genes and the environment. If you want a dark Siamese cat, he joked, you should keep it in the fridge; and if you want a pale one, you should keep it in a warm room. He showed a photograph of an Islington cat which had had an E shaved in its fur when it was young. This made the skin cooler and the cat then always had a dark coloured E in its fur.

Humans are also a mix of nature and nurture. Mo Farah's twin brother used to beat him in running races when they were young. But after one twin trained and the other didn't, it was always Mo who won the races, in spite of the two brothers having identical genes.

Obesity tends to run in families. But it is not just about the genes. Some people have an inability to produce the hormone leptin which gives a feeling of satiation. This can be carried by families, but fat families tend to have fat pets – because they feed them too much, not because they share genes.

Steve believes that the role of genetics and their impact on our lives has been exaggerated by the media. "There is no gene therapy for inherited diseases", he said. And he said that pharmaceutical companies had done little to improve lives using genetics. Indeed, even when genetics offers definitive information, people often prefer to live with



uncertainty. For example, when a test can detect the gene for a nasty inheritable disease such as Huntington's Chorea, many people would rather not know whether they have, or have not, inherited the gene.

The more you know about nature, he concluded, the more important nurture becomes.

**April 2015 Diana Kuh**

### **A life course approach to ageing**

Diana is Director of the MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing at University College London where she studies the social and biological factors of early life that can affect health in later life. She told the April

monthly meeting about the study that has tracked a group of babies who were born in a single week in March 1946.



Over 5000 babies have been tested, measured and followed throughout their entire lives. They are now 69 years old and have been sent asked for information 25 times so far. Most delight in their annual birthday card from the study.

At first the focus was on birth weight, nutrition and differences in economic circumstances and the impact on later life chances. Then there followed studies on class and educational opportunities; and as they became adults the sample was asked about work, family and health, quizzed on smoking, measured for weight gain and analysed for disease patterns.

From the outset the study had a practical impact. Many of the babies were born at home with support from midwives, who were not allowed to give gas and air for pain relief. This was soon changed after the study findings were published.

About 15% of the sample died before they reached 65 years old, about the same percentage have emigrated and not all participants have kept up contact. The sample is now down to about 2800 study members, but it is still yielding important information.

Diana said that they can now look back to see what kinds of factors from childhood relate to scores on physical tasks assessed in midlife such as standing on one leg with eyes shut, rising from a chair swiftly, or walking at speed, and also see how these scores, in turn, predict whether individuals getting older stay in reasonable health. There are big differences in how people age, relating to childhood social class, she said.

Scientists are still looking for bio-markers that will be accurate predictors of health in later life, but, she told the meeting, established measures such as weight and blood pressure will still be important.

The sorts of diseases that we die from in the West, such as coronary heart disease, are influenced to some extent by genetics, but there is still plenty of room for environmental factors to influence the outcomes for individuals and populations.

## May 2015 Professor Lloyd Peck

### The wonders of the Antarctic and what it can teach us



Lloyd Peck is a marine biologist who came to bang the drum for biodiversity. He told us not to focus on lions and tigers, but the marine animals of the southern oceans of Antarctica.

The Antarctic is an extraordinary environment: larger than Europe, cut off from other continents for 35 million years, it holds 90% of the world's fresh water and is covered by an ice sheet with an average thickness of two miles.

It's not a cosy place to work. Apart from the extreme cold and fierce winds, the waves can reach 25m, and at times the scientists cannot leave their tents for days at a time. One pair were holed up in their 8' x 8' tent for 49 days – they could not even take a single step outside.

Unexpectedly, the animals in the cold regions of the world have much in common with those in the tropics. Both regions have temperatures that hardly vary, so the animals are not adept at acclimatising to changing conditions.

Many Antarctic species are found nowhere else in the world. For instance, there is a six foot long ice fish that has clear blood - no red blood cells. It is "the ultimate couch potato" said Lloyd. Its metabolism is very slow and it lives for up to 100 years, and like all Antarctic fish, it has a form of anti-freeze that stops its blood from freezing.

There is also a tendency for things to grow to huge sizes in these cold water, with sponges bigger than a man's head. Lloyd brought along the skeleton of a giant 10 legged sea spider (see picture), a relative of the tiny spiders found on British beaches. They grow slowly and live a long time.

Many creatures living in these freezing regions have a heat shock protein that protects them when temperatures warm. But some species living in stable sub-zero temperatures do not have the ability to produce this shock response and this leaves them unable to adapt to climate change.

Most Antarctic animals are well adapted to their environment. Penguins, for instance, huddle in a spiral and shuffle along taking it in turns to be in

the chilly outer ring and the warm centre. The change is most needed by those in the centre who are at risk of overheating.

Lloyd is worried about the future of this precious environment. The international treaty is not due to be renewed for over 20 years, but he is concerned that Russia and China will not sign up to continue the ban on mineral exploitation in Antarctica.

## June 2015 Grayson Perry

### Inspiration is for amateurs; originality is over-rated



We were expecting Grayson Perry at the June monthly meeting, but hoping for Claire.

And we got the works, full make-up, yellow frilled dress with a design of cups and saucers, shiny red shoes, frilly white ankle socks, and a rubber chicken handbag: and a brilliant and entertaining

talk.

Grayson/Claire works in Islington and has lived here for over 30 years. "I'm in the silliness business. I say to the students who make my dresses, that I want one that's going to make me think twice about walking out in it" he told the packed room.

He freely admits to capturing ideas from all around him – including the work of other artists. "We are like a filter, nothing is original," he said. His very first piece of pottery from 1983 was based on something he'd seen at the V&A.

He was later taken by a late nineteenth century Japanese pot decorated with flowers – his version, called *Lovely Boys*, showed transvestites with a decoration of tiny planes. He has also used Afgan war rugs that show guns, rockets and helicopters, as the jumping off point for his own work – he produced a rug showing wounded war veterans returning home to fight the peace with a border of shopping trolleys, TVs, Hoovers and cars instead of weapons.

His tapestries start with a felt tip pen doodle, then he works on the image on a tablet computer, before handing it over to a computer expert who

gets the technicalities right before sending it across to a company in Belgium that takes five days to set up the loom and just five hours to make a single tapestry. He usually produces between five and ten of each design and sells them to spread the cost.

"Creativity is mistakes", says Grayson/Claire: like the time he agreed to do a talk, thinking it was in Hertford – not too far away. But it turned out to be Hereford- which is a tiresomely long way from Islington. And there he saw the Mappa Mundi which was his inspiration for his Map of Nowhere and then a map of the art world on a vase, which included Tate Director Sir Nicholas Serota as the Pope.

"That mistake of one letter in an email has led to fruitful creativity, a piece in MOMA (The Museum of Modern Art in New York) and lots of money," he said gleefully. "I want to make a living out of art. I like money, and I'm fine with that. I don't want to be a reclusive monk."

He told us that last weekend he stayed in the holiday home artwork that he co-designed alongside an architect. The house in Essex tells the story of 'Julie' who had her children young before disposables were invented, went on to have two husbands, and met her end by being run over by a curry delivery moped. The house is open to the public but sadly the ballot for places is now closed, he said.

## **July 2015 Nina Clarke**

### **Population Growth: can we cope with another 80 million every year?**



"The figures are so big, you can't grasp it," Nina Clarke, Vice Chair of Population Matters told the July monthly meeting.

In 1800, the world's population was about 1 billion, by 2000 it was 6bn; and it is now approaching 8bn.

The growing population is a threat to human well-being and their food and water resources; animals and the environment. Population growth is not just a problem for developing countries. Children in highly developed countries consume so much more than children in developing countries.

So everyone must be aware of the impact of having large families, she said.

We can start debates on the subject among those we know of child-bearing years. Just a small decline in average family size can have a huge impact on population sizes.

Population Matters supports voluntary family size reduction and does not advocate the Chinese one-child approach: Although Nina said that China's population is now projected to start shrinking.

The charity supports the policy of restricting child benefit to the first and second children, but it should only apply to children born after the legislation is passed. And there should also be a means tested safety net for children in need.

Nina said that Melinda Gates is one of her heroes. She is a Catholic but has started campaigning for family planning. As well as providing access to contraception, education is key to getting families to limit the number of children they have. "Education is not only for women, but men too," she said.

## **September 2015 Sarah Dunant**

### **Under the skin of the Italian Renaissance: through history, fiction and art**

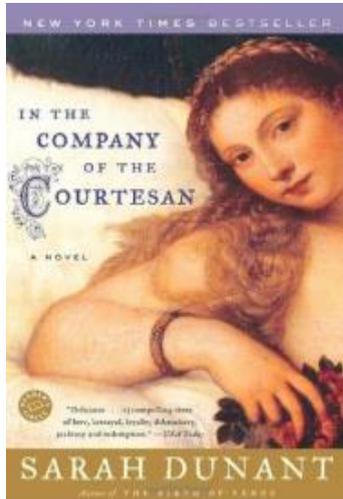


Sarah took us on a journey that she had first taken in 2000, exploring Florence enthralled by the art in churches and palaces, imagining life there 500 years ago. Artists in the early flowering of the Italian Renaissance were seeking to present a more naturalistic world so that portraits of people appeared to live and breathe. Paintings of the Virgin Mary and

the child Jesus changed from being iconic, stiff and stylised to depicting these figures as human, showing emotion and human frailty.

Sarah's interest in the art and history of the Italian Renaissance has become a rich source for her historical novels, which focus on the lives of women in 15th and 16th century Italy. Writers, just like artists, want to paint portraits of people that bring them to life. She was particularly

struck by how often the people in Renaissance paintings were men. Women were rarely represented, other than the Virgin Mary. At that time women had few options in life compared to men: their choices were marriage, a convent, or prostitution.



One option was to become a courtesan, a role for which girls in poorer families were often trained by their mothers so as to avoid the harsh life of street prostitution. Courtesans often became educated, cultured and highly sought after. If favoured by elite clients they could become wealthy members of society, as portrayed in Titian's famous Venetian painting Venus of Urbino. Sarah uses this scenario in her novel "In the Company of the Courtesan" set in Venice in the 16th century. Renaissance artists also began to include depictions of ordinary people in their paintings, people you might see on the street. The street life depicted in paintings often included dwarfs, kept as 'exotics' by courtesans, along with parrots and other pets to entertain their clients, as Sarah describes in her novels.

The dowry system meant that many families could not afford to marry off all their daughters and so many women were forced to enter a convent, where life could be very bleak. Sarah used this historical background for her novel Sacred Beauty set in Florence, using letters and diaries kept by women who were confined to convents as part of her research.

The many paintings Sarah showed us to illustrate her talk were wonderfully brought to life by her enthralling descriptions of women's lives in the Italian Renaissance.