

Who Am I?

Edward Lucie-Smith

Edward Lucie-Smith has been called 'the world's most legendary and prolific art critic'. He has published over 100 books, many of which form the basis of university art history programmes around the world.

CJLPA invited him to boil down his knowledge and experience to a concise set of propositions.

One of the problems of having lived a long life is that it brings home to one the many different identities one has occupied in the course of it.

My own case, I think (but this may be vanity), is particularly complex. For example, genetic analysis tells me I am only marginally white European Caucasian. The rest is 18 percent Jewish—a Jewish grandmother—and just over 30 percent Finnish or Estonian. That is to say, I am a descendant of the Central European tribes who settled on the shores of the Baltic before the Slavs got there. The 'Lucie' part of my surname is recorded as being London Dutch, but Dutch friends tell me that it cannot possibly be native to the Netherlands. It most likely comes from Huguenots, exiled from France by the Edict of Nantes, who transited from the Low Countries to London, and thence to the West Indies. My father's family are recorded in Barbados, as plantation owners, from around 1630. My double-surname seems to have come into use in the mid-eighteenth century.

The family did not remain in Barbados. Having lost money, they translated in the early nineteenth century to Demerara, now Guyana, where they became lawyers. In this period an ancestor on my paternal grandmother's side is recorded as having been a Jewish sea-captain from a Jewish family based in Curaçao, who had migrated there from Venezuela, after an episode of anti-Semitic persecution.

My great-grandfather arrived in Jamaica from Guyana in the early 1860s, having been appointed Lord Chief Justice. He brought with him his already adult son, my grandfather, who joined the Jamaican colonial civil service, a profession into which he was followed by my father. My father was the first member of my family to be born there.

I was not, however, the second. My father had a younger brother, a member of the Jamaica Militia, who went to Flanders to fight in the First World War. Soon he was 'missing, presumed killed'. My father took leave from his civil service job to join the British army in Europe as a volunteer. He became a junior officer and arrived at the front in time to be gassed in the final, desperate German assault in the spring of 1918. Considered unfit for further service at the front, he was sent across the Channel to be the aide-de-camp of an elderly home-front general, a post for which his civil service training would come in useful. That was how he met my mother, an orphan who was the general's niece.

This was not quite the end of the story. My father was not back in Jamaica until September 1919, a year after the war ended. He returned to resume his civil service job and was only then demobilised. Very soon afterwards he formed a relationship with a woman of colour, with whom he had a son, born in 1920. This son, my elder half-brother, not only used our unusual surname, but also was given my father's almost equally unusual Christian name, which was Dudley. He is now dead—I never met him, and did not even know of his existence until quite recently—but his descendants believe that their parents were legitimately married. The barrier to this, however, is that, in the colonial Jamaica of that time, it would have been impossible for a member of the civil service administration to have a wife of African origin. If a marriage took place, it was a clandestine one. I believe, however, that my father went right on seeing his alternative family, long after he got married to my mother.

In the summer of 1922, he returned to the UK, on leave from his civil service job, linked up with my mother again, and proposed to her. She came out to Jamaica and married him in the spring of 1923. I did not appear until ten years later.

Both of them got something. My mother came from quite a distinguished family. Her great-grandfather had been prominent in the British East India Company, at a time when the Company, not the British government, ruled India. He was rewarded with a baronetcy. His younger son, my great-grandfather, was a Member of Parliament and a close ally of Wilberforce in opposition to the slave trade. My great-grandfather's children were closely linked to the Pre-Raphaelites. One of them was responsible for introducing Edward Burne-Jones, not yet an artist, to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, thus setting in motion the second phase of Pre-Raphaelitism. Curiously enough, the Lushingtons (that was their surname) were also Logical Positivists—that is to say, Victorian atheists.

My mother was a neglected orphan, brought up by governesses in various seaside resorts, and lamed by polio when in her teens. In the years immediately following the First World War, when so many of the young men of her class and generation had been killed, her marriage prospects were not good. Both parties needed something. They had a deal. I am the product of that deal.