

# A Conversation with George A. Barnard

Morris H. DeGroot

George A. Barnard was born on September 23, 1915, in Walthamstow, Essex, England. He received a B.A. in Mathematics from Cambridge University in 1936, did graduate work in mathematics at Princeton University from 1937 to 1939, and received a D.Sc. from the University of London in 1965 based on his publications. He was a Mathematical Consultant in the Plessey Co. from 1940 to 1942; a Scientific Officer in the Ministry of Supply Advisory Unit from 1942 to 1945; and a faculty member in the Mathematics Department, Imperial College, London, from 1945 to 1966, serving as Lecturer (1945-1947), Reader in Mathematical Statistics (1948-1954) and Professor of Mathematical Statistics (1954-1966). He was Professor of Mathematics at the University of Essex from 1966 to 1975, and Professor of Statistics at the University of Waterloo from 1975 until his retirement in 1981. He served as President of the Royal Statistical Society in 1971-1972, Chairman of the Institute of Statisticians in 1960-1962, President of the Operational Research Society in 1962-1964 and President of the Institute of Mathematics and Its Applications in 1970-1971. He has been awarded Gold Medals from the Royal Statistical Society and the Institute of Mathematics and Its Applications, and in 1987 was named an Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Statisticians. He has received honorary doctorates from the University of Waterloo and the Open University.

The following conversation took place during the Third Valencia International Meeting on Bayesian Statistics in Altea, Spain, in June 1987.

## "IF YOU'VE DONE THAT, YOU'LL KNOW STATISTICS"

**DeGroot:** How did you originally get interested in statistics?

**Barnard:** Well, I was interested in statistics at school, partly from a philosophical point of view but also from a political point of view. In 1932 I won an exhibition, that is, a junior scholarship, in mathematics to St. John's College, Cambridge, and while waiting to go up to Cambridge in October 1933, I did a survey among the sixth-formers in my school, the senior people in school, to discover what their political opinions were and how they arrived at them.

**DeGroot:** You were interested in politics even at this point?

**Barnard:** I was interested in politics at school, yes. I think it's probably past history now, and quite forgotten, but at that time there was a famous resolution of the Oxford Union which said, "This house refuses to fight for king and country." That was a great stir at the time. The same resolution was carried all over England by student groups and school boys, and we did it in my school. The idea was that the 1914-1918 War had been fought and was a bloody slaughter, and it was done in the name of king and

country. The view was that our generation might well be prepared to fight for other causes, but not for that one.

**DeGroot:** Was this already responding to Hitler coming into power?

**Barnard:** Not really. There was trouble brewing in Germany, it was visible, but Hitler really came to power in 1933, the following year. However, it was associated with that. The feeling grew up that one might have to fight against fascism but one wasn't going to be fighting just for king and country. Statistically what was interesting to me was whether the views of people were influenced by the newspapers and if so, whether they absorbed those views directly from the political end of the paper or from just the atmosphere. So I had a question in the survey as to what their opinions were and what the opinions of the newspaper were, and whether they first read the sports pages or whether they first read the political pages. And I was then struck because I wanted to establish whether the relationship was stronger if they first read the sports pages or weaker. I got in touch with Wilfred Stevens, who later was one of the coauthors of Fisher and Yates' *Tables*. He was working with Fisher at the time and he helped me do the partial correlations.

**DeGroot:** Where was he and where were you?