EPILOGUE

LISTER'S PORTRAIT AND THE TRAGEDY OF BURWELL PARK

The reader may note that the main (and only) portrait of Martin Lister in this book is in monochrome (Figure 38). When I began this work, I believed optimistically that a lovely full-colored visage would be trivial to find. Surely, such an eminent Royal physician, officer of the Royal Society, alumnus of Cambridge and Oxford, and major donor to the Ashmolean Museum would have had several images painted or engraved. After all, there were numerous portraits of his parents, his mother’s being part of the Tate Collection.1 Lister’s daughters were also artists, so it was not altogether unreasonable to expect that they had subjected their father to a sitting. I was wrong.

Paraphrasing George Bernard Shaw: “The reasonable woman adapts herself to the world: the unreasonable woman persists in trying to adapt the world to herself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable woman,” I decided I had better make some progress.2 Three years of queries around the world passed without any solid leads, the only image available a damaged and fuzzy reproduction that was circulating on Wikipedia without attribution. After weeks of searching, I tracked down the Wikipedia image to a black-and-white photograph in the archives of the Natural History Museum in London, but, frustratingly, the photo had no provenance. John Parker and Basil Harley had to use the same unsatisfactory illustration for their groundbreaking translation of Lister’s English Spiders. I came slowly to the conclusion that perhaps that would be my fate as well.

A chance conversation at the Royal Society changed all that. After I contacted Keith Moore, the director of the library, he mentioned a file box of portraits that had been kept by past archivists. The practice had been for staff to cut out any portraits of Royal Society Fellows they saw in auction catalogues for future reference. Keith went into the back offices, and, like a magician performing a card trick, produced, seemingly out of nowhere, a scrap of paper, sliding it across the table.

1 Cornelius Johnson (1593–1661), Portrait of Susanna Temple, later Lady Lister, 1620, Tate Britain. My thanks to Karen Hearn, Curator of Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Art, for supplying me with the provenance of this portrait.
2 Shaw, Man, 238.
Fig. 38  Portrait of Martin Lister, M.D. F.R.S., circle of Charles Jervas (c.1675–1739). © Christie’s Images Limited 2000.